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A Navajo Raine Novelet

By JACKSON COLE

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A Tombstone & Speedy Novelet

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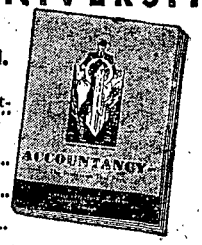

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EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. 17, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION July, 1949

SHADOWS ON THE RAFTER R

By W. C. TUTTLE

A buckboard mishap starts those two rollicking range sleuths, Tombstone and Speedy, on a trail of plundering ruffians in which they match wits and guns with Border bandits! Complete novelet 9

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A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

FOLKS, the call of the trapline, the thrill of catching your own valuable fur-bearer pelts is as old in the West as the first mountain men and the early French Canadian voyageurs who long ago pioneered the rich wild game and Indian country on the far side of the Mississippi. It still offers opportunity to the outdoor wanderer who hones to make his beans and bacon—and sometimes more—living in the wilds.

Often the quest is for the prized skins of the sable, the otter and the mink. More often, especially today, the lowly muskrat provides, at least in point of numbers, the bulk of the trapper's take.

Though muskrat skins bring less per prime pelt than skins of the richer fur-bearers, what they lack in individual value they make up for in bulk and numbers taken. In the aggregate the total value of muskrat skins trapped in the United States totals millions yearly.

Most anybody can trap muskrats. Either as a profession, or a part time avocation. He can even raise them, if he wants to and owns—or can lease—a tract of swampy land.

Moreover muskrat distribution is widespread. The animals can be trapped not only in the West but clear across the U.S.A. most anywhere except the Arizona desert, or other arid land.

Wherever there are swamps and marshes, shallow ponds, or lakes with shallow edges muskrats are likely to be found. And so are hombres—outdoor gals too—engaged in trapping them.

Muskrat Country

Primarily, and in the order given, the type of country muskrats like to live in—and thrive in—are (1) Marsh areas; (2) Swamps; (3) Ponds, lakes, streams, canals; (4) Bodies of water without marshy borders. More muskrats are found on given areas of the first two classes than on either of the second two.

The principal reason for this is that marshes and swamps themselves produce the food necessary to maintain muskrats, and this naturally induces them to live and breed there.

Moreover, and this is something that should be remembered by beginners or young and inexperienced trappers, the biggest fur catches are not always made in some remote deep timber wilderness. This is true of almost any kind of fur trapping. Doubly true in the case of muskrats. As most any country-raised lad knows, muskrats in nicely paying numbers can often be trapped in swamps and marshes close to home.

Obviously such wilderness dwellers as marten, otter, fisher, the wolverene and lynx stick pretty much to the way back regions into which they have been driven. And it usually takes an experienced trapper and back country woodsman to trap them. But right now we are talking about muskrats. And for the purposes of this piece trapping them—not raising them.

Raising muskrats is a separate story. We'll get to that sometime, if my wind holds out and a kindly Editor sees fit to keep on printing these little pieces on the host of present day outdoor opportunities the fascinating West is still so full of.

Preparing the Traps

A No. 1½ steel trap is about the best bet for muskrat sets. If you use old traps remember they should be clean, free of rust, dirt and foreign odors and in good working condition. Should the traps be rusty take the time to remove the rust with a stiff wire brush and emery paper. It will pay in the long run when you start to set your traps. Otherwise buy new ones.

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New traps come with a coating of oil and grease on them. This should be removed and the traps properly prepared before they are ready for use. One method is to let the traps "cook" for an hour or longer in a bath of boiling water to which has been added about a pound of logwood chips, maple bark or hemlock bark per gallon of water. Then hang the traps in the open—on an evergreen tree, if possible—for 48 hours to let them air out thoroughly.

Another popular system is to rub off as much grease and oil as you can with a cloth, then put the traps in a pail or old wash boiler containing a pound or so of wood ashes. Add water and boil for at least an hour. Have some sawdust on hand and rub it on the traps when you take them out of the boiling water. The sawdust will absorb any grease still remaining on the traps.

Then instead of hanging the traps up, place them in some natural running water for a few days. After that boil them for an hour in water to which oak bark has been added in the proportion roughly of a pound of bark to each gallon of water. This will season your traps and give them a darker color that makes them less conspicuous when your trap sets are prepared.

Whatever method of cleaning and seasoning you use, once your traps are ready for use it is a good idea to keep them in a clean box of their own in the bottom of which a heavy layer of dry leaves has been placed. This keeps your traps where you know where they are—and free from any man, or man-habitation odors that might scare off a wary fur-bearer.

Muskrats are one of the easiest of all fur-bearers to trap. Though trapping methods vary somewhat in different sections of the country, they are all—because of the muskrat's habits and native habitat—basically the same. The big thing to guard against is a muskrat breaking loose from a trap through tearing his delicately constructed front leg. The creatures use their hind legs and feet mainly in swimming, their front legs very little.

Drowning Sets

As a result a muskrat's hind legs are strong and muscular while his front legs are thin and weak. Therefore the most successful and humane method of trapping muskrats is to make a drowning set that

(Continued on Page 92)

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E-E-E-K!
A COUGAR!
O-W-O-O-O!
O-W-O-O-O!
SALLY BRETT AND HER BROTHER JOE, ARE JUST TURNING HOMEWARD AFTER A DAY-LONG RIDE IN STATE CANYON FOREST WHEN . . .
THE DOGS HAVE TREED HIM! COME ALONG AND WATCH US GET HIM
YIP! YIP! YIP!
THAT'S THE END OF THAT CATTLE KILLER
NOW I'VE GOT TO WORK FAST . . . SKIN HIM AND HIKE TO CEDAR CITY BY DARK
THAT'S OUR BASE, TOO. SAY! YOU RIDE SIS'S HORSE AND WE'LL DOUBLE UP!
DINNER? THANKS, BUT I'D BETTER DRIVE TO THE RANCH. I'M HARDLY IN SHAPE TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC
DON'T WORRY, WE CAN CLEAN UP IN MY ROOM
LATER
RAZOR? SURE THING!
SHE'S A BEAUTIFUL GIRL
SAY, THIS BLADE'S SURE KEEN AND EASY-SHAVING . . . AND MY BEARD'S LIKE WIRE
TOUGH BEARD'S NO PROBLEM FOR THIN GILLETTES
I SURE WISH YOU'D ACCEPT. THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE RANCH AND . . .
WE STILL HAVE A WEEK, SIS. HOW ABOUT IT?
I'D LOVE IT
HE'S SO HANDSOME!
YOU SKIM OFF TOUGH BEARD SLICK AS SILK . . . GET BETTER SHAVES AND MORE OF 'EM . . . WITH THIN GILLETTES. THESE KEEN, LONG-LASTING BLADES FIT YOUR RAZOR EXACTLY . . . NEVER IRRITATE YOUR FACE AS DO MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE
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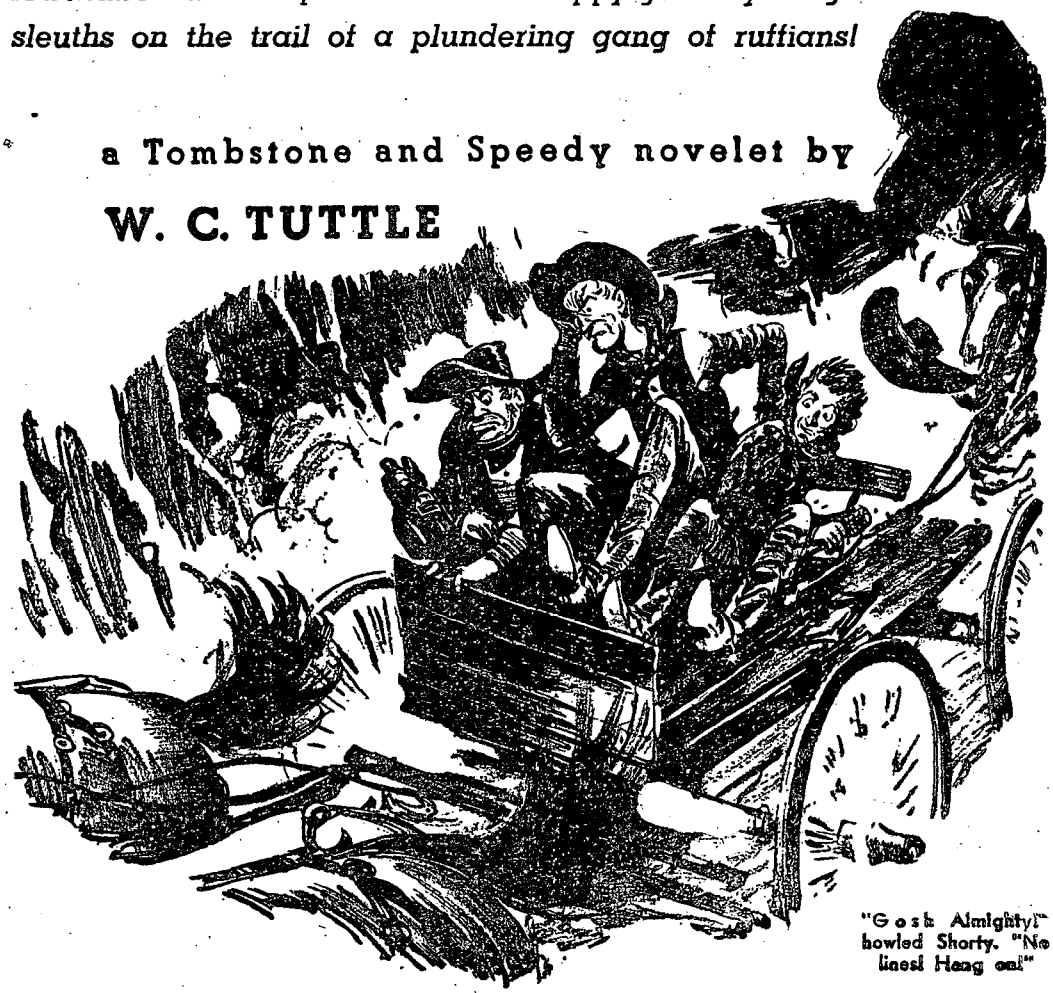
A buckboard mishap starts the two happy-go-lucky range sleuths on the trail of a plundering gang of ruffians!

a Tombstone and Speedy novelet by

W. C. TUTTLE



"Gosh Almighty!" howled Shorty. "No lines! Hang on!"

SHADOWS on the RAFTER R

CHAPTER I

Flying Buckboard

TOMBSTONE JONES bought a valise. This plain statement of fact would mean nothing, because the people of the world buy many pieces of luggage every day when they need luggage. Tombstone Jones had no more use for a valise than he would have for a third spur or an extra boot. Imagine a cowboy, seven feet tall, built like a length of maguey rope, walking down the street with a little yellow valise clutched in his hamlike hand.

Speedy Smith, Tombstone's partner, five feet, seven inches, also built from the aforementioned maguey-rope pat-

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tern, sat on the end of a filled hitch-rack on the main street of Cabrizo, and watched the approach of Tombstone Jones.

Tombstone leaned against the rack, shoved back his battered sombrero, wiped his brow with his sleeve. Speedy spat into the hot dust.

TOMBSTONE JONES

"Dude!" he said disgustedly.

"No such thing, Speedy," denied Tombstone. "It only cost me a dollar and six-bits."

"What's it good fer?" asked Speedy.

"To put things into."

"For instance?"

"Huh? Well, nothin' much."

"That's what I thought when yuh drove up. Yuh can't put it in yore pocket, yuh can't tie it on a saddle. Throw it away before some near-sighted war-whoop mistakes yuh for a towerist and tries to sell yuh a silver bracelet."

Tombstone thought it over, placed it on the hitch-rack and began rolling a cigarette. These two cowboys were clad about alike, faded shirts, faded overalls, dusty, high-heel boots, battered sombreros. Even their belts and holsters were home-made, fitting perfectly, and the handles of their Colt guns were plain wood, polished from use.

They had ridden into Cabrizo, heading for nowhere. No one in their right mind would ever imagine for a moment that these two were investigators for the Cattlemen's Association. In fact, Jim Keaton, the secretary of the association, always looked at them and shook his head over the possibility that they could be detectives.

Tombstone Jones could not read nor write, lied gloriously on any occasion, and loved a good fight, gun or fists. Speedy could read and write a little, corroborated Tombstone's lies, and could pick up a first-class fabrication where Tombstone left off. Just now they were on a self-inflicted vacation, not having notified the office where they were going. Tombstone had said, "I kind of like to get alone with my thoughts." Speedy had said, "That shore leaves yuh alone—period."

SLOWLY Tombstone lighted his cigarette. He looked thoughtfully at the offending yellow valise. He said, "We could use it to carry papers in."

"Papers!" snorted Speedy. "Cigarette-papers, yuh mean?"

"Huh! That's right—we ain't got none. Don'tcha figure we ort to send a telegram to Jim Keaton, tellin' him what we're doin'?"

"He knows what we're doin'—nothin'. What else could we tell him?"

"Ask him for a raise," suggested Tombstone. "It allus makes him so mad that he forgives our sins. And yuh can't tell but he might have a easy job for us—if he ain't already fired us?"

They wandered over to the depot, where Speedy secured a blank and a pencil. After a period of deep thought, he wrote:

TOMBSTONE'S UNCLE AMOS DIED HERE AND WE CAME TO PAY OUR RESPECTS.

He read what he had written, to Tombstone, who gasped:

"Uncle Amos is dead? Speedy, I cain't believe it! Why, he was my fav'rite of all my uncles. Poor ol' Uncle Amos. You said Amos, didn't yuh, Speedy?"

"Yeah," replied Speedy soberly. "I

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could kill one of the others, if it'd make yuh feel any better."

"No, it's all right, Speedy; Uncle Amos can't expect to live forever."

"How long shall I say we'll be here in Cabrizo?"

But Tombstone was paying no attention to Speedy.

He was staring at a short, heavy-set cowboy, who had come into the depot. Tombstone said:

"Shorty Ellis, in the flesh, or I'm a sidewinder's step-child!"

The heavy-set cowboy stopped short, squinting his small eyes at Tombstone Jones.

He said, "That's my name, feller, but who are you?"

"Take a good look."

"He can't," said Speedy. "Yuh're so darn thin that most of his look goes past yuh. Find some feller that's narrer between the eyes and maybe he can see all of yuh to oncet."

Slowly the man's face creased into a grin.

"Tombstone Jones!" he said. "My, my, but you've fattened up! I didn't recognize yuh! And Speedy, too! You fellers must have been eatin' often. Where did you two come from—and why?"

They shook hands soberly. Shorty Ellis looked at them and shook his head. Speedy said, "Oh, we're real, Shorty."

"That's the worst of it," sighed Shorty. "This is a serious country. What are yuh doin' these days, outside of lyin' and fightin'?"

"Lemme see-e-e," said Tombstone. "What was we a-doin' the last time we seen you, Shorty?"

"Lyin' and fightin'."

"Well," said Speedy, "we don't do near as much fightin' as we used to, Shorty. How come you bein' down in these parts?"

"Oh, I've got me a little spread in Cabezon Valley, south of here. I'm progressive."

"What name you usin' down here?" asked Tombstone.

"Same one—Shorty Ellis. I ain't ashamed of it."

"I'd buy a drink," stated Tombstone. "We're still Jones and Smith."

Tombstone picked up his little valise, and Shorty stared at it.

"Have you turned dude, or what?" asked Shorty.

"Yuh mean the valise? No, we just carry our papers in it, Shorty."

"Papers?"

"Oh, yeah—legal stuff. You know how it is."

"Legal papers? Well, I—huh! Yeah, I need a drink."

SPEEDY SMITH

"What about that telegram?" asked Speedy.

"That's right," replied Tombstone. "Well, yuh might telegraph him that Uncle Amos didn't die after all."

"He wouldn't care about that, Tombstone."

"That's Jim's biggest failin'," compained Tombstone. "He ain't sympathetic, the hard-hearted brute!"

"What are you half-wits talkin' about?" asked Shorty Ellis.

"Oh, just a business deal," replied Speedy soberly.

That one drink grew into more than a few. Shorty grew expansive. His little spread in Cabezon Valley grew up to be a great rancho with hundreds of fancy white-faced cows. Several buttons pulled off the bosom of his faded shirt. He invited them to spend a month at his rancho, and they accepted instantly.

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TOMBSTONE shed tears over Shorty's hospitality. Shorty explained that Cabezon means copper-colored.

"What is?" asked Tombstone owlishly.

"Copper," said Shorty.

"That's the mos' remarkable statement I ever heard," declared Speedy. "How far's yore place, Shorty?"

"'Sall accordin' to where yuh are at the time, Speedy. What time 'szit?"

"It's just nine," offered the bartender.

"You didn't promise yore cows when you'd be home, didja?" asked Tombstone.

"No," replied Shorty. "I lef' a note on the gate, but I've only got one cow that can read, and she's visitin' her uncle."

It was about ten minutes past nine o'clock when Shorty decided it was time to go home. They saddled their two horses, tied them behind the buckboard, and the three men squeezed into the seat, with Speedy in the middle.

"Nothin' but close friends could do this," gasped Speedy as they drove out of town, heading south.

There was enough moonlight to make pleasant driving but twenty-five miles, sitting tight in a buckboard seat, doesn't come under the category of pleasure. Shorty's half-broke team wanted to run, and the two saddled horses at the rear didn't want to.

Tombstone said, "We better take it easy, Shorty, or this rig'll get pulled apart."

"Yuh didn't forgit yore valise, didja?" asked Speedy.

"I did not," replied Tombstone. "She's a-settin' back there in all her glory."

They were about ten miles out of Cabrizo, rattling along, heading down along a canyon wall, when Shorty said, "I'll pull up here, and we'll open that bottle; I'm awful dry from talkin'."

"Have you been talkin'?" asked Speedy.

"Talkin' to himself," said Tombstone. "Shorty used to herd sheep."

"Yea-a-a-a-a!" bleated Shorty, pulling up the team.

The road was narrow, and there was a sharp drop on the right-hand side, but they stopped with all four wheels on the ground. Shorty got the bottle from between his feet and was trying to open it, when a team and buckboard, traveling at a dangerous pace, came in from behind them, almost sideswiped them, and went on in a cloud of dust and a volley of profanity from the three cowboys. They got the cork out of the bottle and each had a drink.

Shorty said, "Grab them lines, Speedy, while I cork this thing up. We'll show them fellers our dust, or my name ain't Shorty Ellis. Yee-o-o-o-ow!"

The team went right out of there, yanking the led horses into a run. The road had never been built for speed, but it was getting a taste of it right now.

Tombstone yelled, "Pull 'em up, Speedy!"

"Pull 'em up, Shorty!" relayed Speedy.

"You've got the lines!" snorted Shorty. "I—I gave you the lines."

"You didn't give me nothin'," yelled Speedy. "You said for me to grab 'em, but I didn't know where to grab. I'm so squeezed that I ain't got no grab left."

"Gosh A'mighty!" howled Shorty. "No lines! Hang on, boys!"

"Don't hang onto me!" shrilled Speedy. "I ain't perm'nent!"

Ahead of them the two running horses were throwing dust into their faces, and behind them pounded the two saddled horses, the body of the frail buckboard creaking under the pull of the ropes.

"Somethin' is goin' to happen!" yelled Shorty. "This cain't go on forever!"

Suddenly the team swerved to the left, the buckboard bounced against the rocky wall, and a gun was fired almost in their faces. Things were rather confused for the next few moments, the air filled with flying objects, including buckboard wheels. A man was cursing very fluently. Gradually things came back to normal. Hoofs were pounding down the grade, the dust settling.

Tombstone, sitting up in the middle of the road, gasped, "Heaven is my home!"

"That," said Speedy from over by the rocky wall, "is wishful thinkin', I'd say."

"Is anybody alive?" asked Shorty painfully. He was further down the grade, trying to straighten one leg.

Tombstone replied, "I ain't heard

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Tombstone went sailing out of the wagon

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from more'n a few scattered precincts, but indications point to landslide in favor of it."

"Dad-blamed optimist!" groaned Speedy. He got up, took two steps, stumbled and fell down again.

"Hinges busted?" asked Tombstone.

"Na-a-aw, I fell over yore danged valise!"

"I wish you'd fall over that bottle," said Shorty. "I cain't find it anywhere. Man, I caught m' toes on that dashboard, when the throwin' started, and I'll bet I'm six inches taller than I was. What happened? Who shot at us?"

"I didn't git his name," groaned Speedy. "After all, in a case like that, yuh don't bother with details. Tombstone, are yuh hurt?"

"I—I got burnt," replied Tombstone.

"Burnt!" snorted Shorty. "There wasn't no fire."

"Listen, pardner," said Tombstone, "you try slidin' about forty feet on the seat of yore pants, and I'll bet you'll build up a temperature. I'm what you'd call a burnt offerin'."

CHAPTER II

Two Wheels Too Many

SOON they got together and compared notes. Outside of a few bruises and burned spots, they were all right. A little further on they found their saddled horses, still tied to a section of the buckboard which had pulled loose. All three of them, with Tombstone clinging to his little, yellow valise, mounted the two horses and went on. They found a few pieces of the buckboard, and at the end of the grade, where it leveled off into Cabezon Valley, they found the buckboard team, minus most of the harness.

They caught the animals and took them along. Shorty's place was nothing to brag about, but they were glad to see the two-room shack. It was a place to relax and use horse-liniment. They daubed themselves liberally with the pungent liniment, cooked a feed of ham and eggs, and rolled into their blankets.

Half asleep Speedy said, "What'd yuh do with that darn valise?"

"I hung her up in the stable."

"Leave her there," advised Speedy.

"Yea-a-ah," a g r e e d Tombstone. "She's a impediment. We didn't get no answer from Jim Keaton, did we?"

"We never even sent him a telegram."

"Oh, yeah—well, that's prob'ly why."

"You must have hit harder than I thought."

"I did. You couldn't think that hard."

* * * * *

"Slim" Delaney, sheriff of Palo Verde, stood in the doorway of his little office, a queer, tense expression on his lean face, as though anticipating something terrible. Behind him in the office there was a low sound, sort of a tung, tung, tung variety. Suddenly something went *tung-g-g-g-g!* Slim relaxed, slowly turned his head and looked back, as a voice said:

"Dad-blasted strings ain't strong enough f'r anythin'! Whipped back and almost cut m' hand off!"

"You and yore blasted gittar!" snorted the sheriff. "I'd sooner wait for a rattler to strike than to wait for you to bust a string. And yuh will do it, too. I'm glad they're all busted."

"It ain't good for a sheriff t' have jittery nerves," declared Harrison Lawrence Moon, the deputy. Folks called him "Injun." He was rather fat and round-faced, with serious eyes.

"You tune 'em too high," complained the sheriff. "Yuh keep twistin' until somethin' breaks."

The sheriff turned to the doorway as a girl rode past the office. She waved at Slim, who smiled broadly.

Injun said, "Who was that, Slim?"

"Shelia Spears."

The sheriff watched her dismount at the general store, and tie her horse. Injun said, "I shore hate to see the Spears' leave this country. Ol' Rufe is a fine feller and Shelia is all right."

Slim hitched up his belt and leaned against the side of the doorway. He said, "Rufe said he was movin' soon's he sold out."

"Uh-huh," grunted Injun. "He went to Cabrizo yesterday with Henry Wagner. I hear they was to settle everythin' last night up there. That Benton person is payin' him cash, I heard. That Rafter R is a right nice spread. Do yuh know anythin' about Benton, Slim?"

"Some dude from the east. Who else could pay seventy-five thousand dollars

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for a ranch. I hear he's goin' to raise fine cows. He told Wagner that he's bringin' his family out here for the summer. He says Benton is a broker, or somethin' like that."

"He dresses awful purty," remarked Injun, "and he talks kinda soft-like, but he's got a cold jaw, I'll say that. I'll betcha that if he walked up to a mesquite—the mesquite would move aside."

"You and yore exaggerations!" snorted Slim. "Horned frawgs three feet long, two feet high at the withers! Jack rabbits with antlers, and rattlesnakes eighteen feet long."

"Seein' is believin'," reminded Injun, "and I've seen them few things in my lifetime."

"Here comes Shelia," said the sheriff quietly.

Shelia Spears came up to the office. She was rather tall, slender, pretty, her mop of copper-colored hair tucked under a sombrero. She wore a blue shirt, overalls and high-heel boots.

"Hello, Slim," she said smiling.

"Howdy, Shelia," he said gravely. "How's everythin'?"

"Well, I hope everything is all right," she said. "Dad went to Cabrizo yesterday with Mr. Wagner, and they haven't come back yet. Dad said they'd be back last night."

"Hm-m-m-m," mused Slim thoughtfully. "Neither of 'em drink, so that wouldn't keep 'em there. Oh, shucks, they're all right. Maybe they finished late and decided to stay all night."

"I hope so," said Shelia. "Dad usually keeps his word."

INJUN poked his head past Slim and said:

"Are you really leavin' the valley, Shelia?"

She nodded and looked up the street. "Yes, we are, Injun. It won't be too easy—leaving here," she replied. "Dad wants to go back to Illinois."

"You won't like it back there," declared Injun.

"Why won't she?" asked Slim quickly. "How do you know she won't?"

"I've been there," replied Injun.

"You went through there on a cattle train, that's all."

"Yeah, and I didn't see anythin' I liked."

Shelia laughed and shook her head. "I don't believe I will. Maybe I've lived in Cabezon Valley too long to like other places. Folks will be different. But Dad wants to try it."

She shaded her eyes from the sun and looked up the road.

"I wish he'd come back," she said quietly.

"Aw, he'll come back," assured Slim. "Maybe they ran a wheel off the buckboard. Oh, lots of things could have made 'em late."

"If it wasn't for one thing, I wouldn't worry, Slim. Mr. Benton was to pay Dad in cash. Dad didn't want a check. You know how he is—he didn't want anything but cash. Mr. Benton finally agreed to pay him in cash, but Dad had to go to Cabezon to get it. Maybe Mr. Benton didn't want to carry that much down here."

"Were the papers all fixed up?" asked Slim.

"Everything, except the signatures, I believe. Mr. Wagner was handling the deal for both sides. Dad trusts Henry Wagner."

"Who don't?" asked Injun. "Henry's perfectly honest."

"Well, if yore dad shows up, I'll tell him to hurry home," said the sheriff.

"Thank you, Slim. I appreciate it a lot."

Shelia rode away, and the two officers sat down in the office. Slim said, "Nothin' could happen to them two."

"'Course not," agreed Injun. "But I'd feel better if they was back."

Slim picked up some letters from his desk, and among them was a telegram. He read it again. It said:

IF TWO MEN NAMED JONES AND SMITH SHOW UP AT YOUR TOWN PLEASE NOTIFY ME COLLECT.
JIM KEATON, SECY,
CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION

"I didn't know that the association chases crooks by telegraph," said the sheriff.

"Prob'ly saves time," remarked Injun.

The sheriff moved back to the doorway, looking out at the street. Three riders were coming into town, and the sheriff squinted against the bright, trying to identify them. He recognized Shorty Ellis but the other two were strangers. He spoke to Injun, who came and took a look, as the three riders drew up at the Pasatiempo Saloon

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hitch-rack, and dismounted.

Injun said, "One of 'em is shore a sky-buster."

Injun's curiosity got the better of him, and he headed for the saloon, where he found Shorty, Tombstone and Speedy against the bar.

Shorty said, "Hyah, Injun. Shake hands with my friends, Jones and Smith. Boys, this is Injun Moon, our diligent deputy sheriff."

Injun shook hands with them. Jones and Smith! The two men wanted by the cattlemen's association. Injun said something about being glad to meet them, declined a drink and hurried back to the office, where, just a little out of breath, he told Slim that the two wanted men were at the Pasatiempo.

"And they look as forked as a *manzanita*," added Injun.

"I'll send the wire," said the sheriff, and started up the street just as the stage rolled in from Cabrizo. The driver motioned for the sheriff to wait, and swung around to the stage-depot where he said to the sheriff:

"Somethin' must have happened on the grades jist above Skeleton Curve," he declared. "Pieces of buckboard scattered all over. Only thing—" He hesitated for a moment. "The only thing is, I seen six wheels, Slim."

"Drinkin' again, eh?"

"I ain't had a drink for a month. It's a long ways into the canyon along there, too, Slim. Might look into it."

"Much obliged, Ira."

THE sheriff filed the telegram to Jim Keaton, telling him that the two men were in town and asking if he wanted them arrested. He came back to the office, told Injun what Ira Decker had said, and they saddled quickly.

Injun said, "I shore hope it ain't—for Shelia's sake, Slim."

"I hope not, Injun. Ira said he seen six buckboard wheels."

"Hu-u-u-uh? Six wheels?"

"Yeah. He's stealin' yore thunder, Injun. You allus see at least fifty percent more'n anybody else."

"Don't jump onto me all the time, Slim. I can't help it if my eyesight's awful keen. Gee, I shore hope it ain't—him."

Over at the Pasatiempo Tombstone said, "Yore friend, the Indian deputy, seems kind of finicky, Shorty."

"He ain't no Injun," said Shorty. "They jist call him that, 'cause his last name's Moon."

"He looked at me like he was lookin' at a ghost," remarked Speedy.

"He did?" gasped Tombstone. "Well, mebbe—yuh're feelin' all right, ain't yuh? Little bit pale around the gills though."

"I'm all right," replied Speedy disgustedly.

"Well, I hope so. I'd hate to be—well, shore, you don't act any different."

"If a feller was dead, he'd know it, wouldn't he?" asked Shorty.

"How?" queried the bartender.

"How," said Tombstone soberly. "Sounds like we belonged to the same tribe."

"Yeah—how?" said Speedy. "If a man was dead— Well, what are we talkin' about, anyway?"

Ira Decker, the stage driver, came in and bought a drink for himself. He told the bartender:

"Must've been a wreck on the grade last night. Buckboard wheels scattered all over the place. I seen six of 'em, scattered plumb down into the valley."

"I thought you'd quit drinkin' Ira," said the bartender. "Not that it makes any difference to me. I sell the stuff."

"This is m' first drink in a month."

"Six wheels, huh?" grunted the bartender, wiping off the bar. "Well, there ain't no law agin havin' six wheels on a buckboard, but I'd like to know what happened to them what was a-ridin' in that six-wheeler."

CHAPTER III

Into the Canyon

COVERTLY, Shorty, Tombstone and Speedy exchanged glances. They might be able to account for four of the wheels, but not six. They went outside.

Shorty said, "We better keep still about this deal, boys. If we hit another buckboard last night, somebody might be in the bottom of the canyon. Better be sure of things before we open our mouths."

"Tell the truth and shame the devil," quoted Tombstone.

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"What does that mean?" asked Speedy.

"I dunno—I heard it, and it shore sounds good. Hadn't we ort to send a telegram to Jim and tell him we're all right?"

"Yuh never could convince him of that in one telegram."

Three cowboys rode into town and drew up at the hitch-rack. Shorty waved at them as they went into the Pasatiempo.

He said, "That's Al Sneed, Tex Wills and Poco Miller. The three of 'em own a little spread south of here, kinda joinin' the Rafter R. I heard that they are tryin' to sell the place to Benton, the feller who is buyin' the Rafter R."

"I'd buy a spread, if I found what I liked," said Tombstone.

"Particular, huh?" said Shorty. "Jist what are you lookin' for, Tombstone?"

"Oh, about forty thousand acres of good grass, plenty water, good ranch-house, lot of good white-faces and some fast horses."

"That'd cost yuh a fortune," declared Shorty.

"I know, Shorty. I'm jist waitin' for one thing, before I take over a place like that."

"One thing? What?"

"A fortune."

"You ort to know better than to ask him questions, Shorty," remarked Speedy. "In fact, we better concentrate on figurin' out where them two extra buckboard wheels came from."

"Hey!" grunted Tombstone. "Remember that team and buckboard that passed us on the grade, when you was tryin' to open that bottle of rattler rub-down? Have yuh got any idea who it was?"

"In the dark, and at that speed? We never caught them. Yea-a-ah! I wonder who that was. More'n that—who shot at us? Tombstone, this is becomin' a mystery."

"That's what I've been a-tryin' to make yuh both understand. Mebbe we knocked somebody off the grade—a two-wheel cart—or somethin'."

Shorty shuddered visibly. "It's awful deep down there," he said.

Ira Decker, the stage-driver, came out, wiping his mustache. Shorty said, "Ira, do yuh figure somebody went off the grade?"

"Yuh mean — they throwed away

Benton's reply came in a pistol blast.

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their six wheels and jumped?"

"Yeah, they could have, Ira."

"Prob'ly. Anyway, Slim and Injun have gone to take a look."

Tombstone, Speedy and Shorty went over and sat down on the high, board sidewalk in front of the general store.

Speedy said, "Shucks! No matter what happened, it was accidental."

"That there shot wasn't accidental," declared Tombstone Jones. "I felt the cold breath of death go right past my ear."

"Scared yuh, huh?" queried Shorty.

"Scared me? Shorty, I've been so close to death's door so many times in my short life that I know every nail in the darn thing. Why, even a couple times I started to knock. Yuh don't think I'd get scared over one measly bullet, do yuh?"

"Yeah," replied Shorty.

"We better stay in town until the sheriff gits back," said Speedy. "After all, we'd like to know what happened to somebody besides us."

IT was two hours later when Injun Moon came back alone, riding fast. He went into the Pasatiempo. Tombstone, Speedy and Shorty went over there, where the deputy was explaining the tragedy. They had found Rufe Spears and Henry Wagner, the lawyer, down in the canyon—both dead. Scattered around was the smashed remains of their buckboard, and the two dead horses. Injun Moon looked sick as he exclaimed how they found the two bodies. There were plenty men to ride out with him.

Shorty said to Tombstone and Speedy, "I reckon we better go home and cogitate on our sins. No use tryin' to explain things that we don't know nothin' about."

"We're as ignorant as angels," protested Tombstone.

"No use slanderin' the hereafter," said Speedy. "You mean we're as innocent as angels."

"I'm glad somebody knows what I mean. I don't understand this deal. If we did knock 'em off the grade, why'd they take time to shoot at us? If yuh got time to shoot, yuh got time to jump. I'm satisfied that we don't know anythin'."

"We don't know anythin', but I ain't satisfied," said Shorty.

THEY went back to the ranch, but were not too happy. Shorty told them about Shelia Spears, and their intentions to sell out and go East.

Shorty said, "Rufe Spears and Henry Wagner were the finest folks we had around here."

"The girl will inherit the money, won't she?" asked Speedy.

"Oh, shore. At least I don't know why she won't."

It was almost dark that evening when Slim Delaney and Injun Moon rode in at the ranchhouse.

Shorty said, "Oh-oh, I don't like the looks of this. You boys let me do the talkin'."

The two officers came in and sat down. There was an awkward pause. Finally the sheriff said, "Here's a telegram for you, Jones. It was sent to my office."

Tombstone accepted the envelope, handed it to Speedy, who nonchalantly put it in his pocket. Both officers looked curiously at them, but said nothing. Slim Delaney did not get a reply from Jim Keaton, but he felt fairly certain that the telegram was from Keaton.

Shorty said, "What's new, Slim?"

"Plenty," replied the sheriff grimly. He turned and looked at Tombstone, as he asked, "When did you boys get here, yesterday?"

"In the afternoon," said Speedy quickly. Shorty nodded violently.

"Yeah, early," added Tombstone.

Shorty said, "What difference does it make, Slim?"

"You boys heard about Rufe Spears and Henry Wagner this afternoon, didn't yuh?"

Shorty nodded. "That they drove off the grade. Terrible, Slim."

"Yeah," agreed Slim. "Rufe Spears had seventy-five thousand dollars in cash with him—and it's gone."

"Yuh mean—somebody got it?"

"Yeah. Somebody who had a buckboard."

"Was it that heavy?" queried Tombstone soberly.

"I mean that they smashed up their buckboard, too."

"Oh!" grunted Shorty. "Maybe that accounts for the six wheels that Ira Decker said he saw on the grade."

The sheriff nodded, and Speedy said, "Why was the gent packin' all that money, Sheriff?"

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Slim Delaney sighed and shifted his position. Shorty's chairs were not too comfortable.

"It's like this," he explained. "A feller from New York, named James Madison Benton, wanted to buy the Rafter R. He's awful rich, they tell me. Don't know nothin' about cows but he wants a fancy place to entertain his family and friends. Old Rufe Spears wants cash money for the spread — seventy-five thousand dollars. It ain't easy to get that much real money, but Benton said he'd get it, and for Spears to meet him in Cabrizo on a certain day. Henry Wagner handles the deal for both of 'em; so him and Rufe went to Cabrizo, where they sign all the papers and Benton pays Rufe seventy-five one thousand dollar bills. They give Benton a receipt for the money, and come back to record the papers.

"Benton comes to Palo Verde a while ago, finds out what happened, and blows up complete. All he's got is a receipt for the money, but it don't say what it was for, and it was signed by Henry Wagner."

"In other words," said Injun, "Mr. Benton has got a worthless receipt— and that's all. Mebbe Henry's got a couple hundred dollars in the bank, and that's all. Benton is shore irked. In fact, he's about to bust his tie-rope and head for the hills."

"That's right," agreed the sheriff. "Before he left Cabrizo he telegraphed his wife and son to come on. Benton is a right nice person, too. What we've got to find is the papers and the money."

"But Shelia still owns the Rafter R," said Injun.

"How'd they happen to run off the grade?" asked Tombstone.

"Nobody knows," replied Injun.

"Yes, they do, too," said the sheriff quickly. "The persons who was in that other buckboard. We found a lot of pieces of busted buckboard at this end of the grade, but yuh can't identify a busted bunch of boards. You've got a buckboard, ain't yuh, Shorty?"

"I shore have," agreed Shorty. "Yore best bet is to check up on every buckboard in the valley, Slim."

"If some careless driver knocked 'em off the grade, how could they have stuck 'em up for the money?" asked Tombstone.

SHERIFF SLIM DELANEY thought it over and finally said, "It don't make very good sense, Jones. How do you think it was done?"

"That'd require a lot of thinkin'," replied Tombstone.

"If Rufe'd asked for a check, instead of cash," said Shorty.

"Shore," agreed Injun. "A check's no good to a holdup man. Just imagine a man comin' south over that road, at night, packin' seventy-five one-thousand-dollar bills."

"I didn't know they made 'em that big," said Tombstone.

"Yuh mean thousand-dollar bills?" asked the sheriff.

"No, fools," replied Tombstone.

"I reckon we better go home, Injun," said the sheriff, getting to his feet. "Much obliged, boys."

After the two officers rode away Speedy opened the telegram and read it carefully.

Tombstone said, "How'd Jim know where we are?"

"He don't say. All he says is, 'Yuh're both fired'."

"Fired? Speedy, he can't do that to me and you! Don't he explain why? Huh? Jist—uh-huh. Well, it's his loss."

"Who fired yuh?" asked Shorty.

"Well," drawled Tombstone, "it's a long story. I was borned in a log cabin in Oklahomy, which had poor but honest parents. When I was a boy—"

"Hold it!" snorted Shorty. "I asked yuh a question, and you try to give me the story of yore life."

"Somebody comin'," said Speedy.

Shorty went to the doorway, as a rider was dismounting. Shorty said, "Hyah, Sam." The cowboy said, "Shorty, howdy," and came in with Shorty, who introduced him as Sam Huff, one of the Rafter R cowhands. Sam was a good-natured, long-jawed cowboy. He said:

"I ain't with the Rafter R no more, Shorty. Me and Ed Corteen was fired this evenin'. Yuh see, Mr. Benton is takin' over the place."

"How come?" asked Shorty. "Slim Delaney was out here a while ago and he said that Benton didn't have nothin' to show ownership."

"I don't know," sighed Sam. "He's done moved in. Shelia went to town. He said she could stay there, until she figured out what to do."

"Who's goin' to run it for him, Sam?"

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"Well, I don't know just what's goin' on, except that he had Tex Wells out there with him. Mebbe Tex is goin' to ramrod the spread for him. I heard that Tex, Al Sneed and Poco Miller are sellin' him their spread, too."

"But what about Shelia?" asked Shorty. "If the money's gone, and they let Benton have the place, where does she get off at?"

"That's what I asked Benton," replied Sam. "He said that he'd paid his good money and the place belonged to him. I said, 'Maybe the law will have somethin' to say about it,' and he said that it wasn't anythin' for me to worry my pretty head about."

"Kind of tough, eh?" remarked Speedy.

"Yeah," agreed Sam, "he's no vi'let. Packs his gun in a shoulder-holster, I know that much about him. Ed Corteen said he was a suspicious person, and I asked him how he knew, and Ed said, 'Counted his fingers twice, after I shook hands with him.' I don't blame him; Ed shakes hands en-thu-siastically."

"So he's goin' to hire Sneed, Wells and Miller, eh?" remarked Shorty. "He's gettin' three pretty good cowboys. Tex ort to be a good ramrod for the Rafter R."

"Yeah, they're all right," agreed Sam. "Kicks me out of a job."

"That seems to be a habit around here," said Shorty, "Tombstone and Speedy jist got a telegram, firin' them, too."

"Telegram?" queried Sam. "That's a new one. What kinda jobs?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh," confided Tombstone. "As long as we was on the job, it was kinda secret. The Gov'ment don't like to have anybody know what's bein' done. For a long time me and Speedy worked on takin' a census of horned-frawgs in Arizona. We'd got up to seven millions, when the rains came along and the horned-frawgs all went into holes. Ruined the job. Well, we loafed a couple days, when here comes an order for us to make a count of all the jackrabbits in the state. Yuh see, weather don't affect 'em. Jist so we won't make a mistake and count one of 'em twice, they made us ear-notch every one. It shore was hard to do."

"You mean, catchin' 'em?" asked Sam Huff.

"No-o-o," drawled Tombstone, "I mean countin' 'em. They was supposed to furnish us with a tally-man. Here we was, out there in the middle of Cochise County, both arms full of notch-eared jacks, and nobody to count 'em. It made us both mad, so we rode over here—and they fired us."

"You mean to say that yuh run 'em down on foot?"

"Why, shore. It's the only way. Shucks a jack can only run sixty miles an hour. The only thing—you've got to be a little careful, as yuh run past and grab his ears, 'cause he might turn quick—and there yuh are, nothin' but ears in yore hand."

"Yeah." Sam Huff nodded. "I reckon yuh're pretty fast, Jones. But how come they fire yuh by telegraph?"

"It's the only thing that can catch us," said Speedy soberly.

"If yuh don't mind," said Sam very soberly, "I'll ride on. Glad to have met yuh."

"You're a wonder, Tombstone," declared Shorty. "You're prob'ly the best of its kind in the state."

"Oh, I dunno," yawned Tombstone. "Speedy is almost as fast as I am, but he has to pick the long-eared ones, 'cause his arms ain't as long as mine."

"And I wasn't talkin' about speed," said Shorty. "I'd like to go to town and find out what's bein' talked about. Want to go along?"

"You go ahead," suggested Speedy. "I'd like to get some part of a big sleep tonight, Shorty."

"Same here," yawned Tombstone. "I couldn't keep awake long enough to run down a short-legged jack. You go ahead, Shorty."

CHAPTER IV

Masked Intruders

AFTER Shorty had gone, Tombstone and Speedy had a look at the place. There was only one bedroom, a small addition, built on the north side of the main room. There was one Navajo rug, a stool and a built-in bunk. Tombstone and Speedy discussed their dismissal from the association. They had a few dollars, but the immedi-

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ate future looked rather discouraging. Neither of them wanted to punch cows at forty-a-month.

"It ain't human," complained Tombstone. "We give him the best years of our life and what do we get? Fired! Fired by telegraph. He-e-ey! Yuh don't suppose they got it wrong, do yuh? Mebbe they couldn't read his writin'."

"I'm scared they made a good guess at it, Tombstone."

"Uh-huh. What'd we tell him in that last telegram? Wasn't it about Uncle Amos dyin'?"

"We never sent that one, remember?"

"Oh, yea-a-ah—we didn't. That's where we made our mistake."

"You figure that out, I can't," said Speedy, pulling off his boots.

"Well, I'll tell yuh what," suggested Tombstone. "Tomorrow we'll send him a telegram, askin' him why we ain't heard from him. Assure him of our love and affection, and tell him we're down here, lookin' for lost money."

"How'd that help?"

"I'll figure that out, too, if I have a little time."

They crawled into bed, leaving a lamp turned low on the table in the main room. There were no locks on Shorty's doors. Later on, Tombstone thought he heard Shorty come home, but didn't bother to wake up completely. A few minutes later he sat up. Speedy was sitting up, too. There were three other people in the room, and none of them was Shorty Ellis. Three masked men, Mexicans, by their garb. One held the lamp, while the biggest Mexican kept a big six-shooter trained on them, the other a rifle.

"Welcome to the masquerade," muttered Speedy. "You can put down that young cannon, if yuh don't mind. We ain't runnin' away."

"W'ere ees the odder one—Shortee?" asked the biggest Mexican.

"Oh, him," said Speedy. "Oh, he went to town to git help."

"Help? From w'at?"

"The sheriff," said Tombstone. "He expected you."

The mouth of the big intruder sagged under his mask. After a few moments he said, "That ees lie. He don't know notheeng."

Tombstone yawned. This was getting monotonous. He hated to look into the muzzle of the big gun. The big man, not turning his head, barked an order to one of his men, who turned and went away, leaving only the big fellow and the one with the lamp.

"What's this all about?" asked Speedy. "Who are you?"

"You don' know me, eh? W'at you care who am I? *Por Dios*, gots out from the bed! Stoods up—eef you are nots too escare."

"Scared of you?" asked Tombstone. "Yuh're crazy."

They got out of bed and stood up, one on each side. Tombstone's full-length red underwear had faded to a sickly pink, and he looked like a parboiled stork, standing there, solemnly staring at the muzzle of the gun. Suddenly he yelped and lifted a foot, an expression of pain on his face.

"Some dad-burned fool left a tack on the floor!" he wailed. "Plumb ruined my foot! There it is!"

Tombstone bent over, squatted a little and seemed to pick up the offending tack. The guard swayed in closer, lifting the lamp high, as though to assist Tombstone in locating the tack, and at that precise moment Tombstone's two big hands grasped the Navajo rug and gave a mighty heave.

The big man, both big boots planted squarely on the rug, didn't have a chance. Both feet flipped into the air, and their rather ornate owner almost turned a backward somersault. Before the lamp-bearer could do anything about it Speedy hit him dead-center with his shoulder, and the man ended up in the middle of the main room, flat on his back. The guard yelled, "*Cuidado!*" and left the front doorway in one long leap, which carried him over the porch floor and past the steps. He landed in the yard and went away from there. The lamp was smashed, but Tombstone knew where Shorty had another.

THEY closed the door, hung blankets over the two windows, and examined their catch. The big man had struck on the back of his head, and he was softly humming what sounded like a very bad version of *Rancho Grande*. The other man was still wheezing air into his depleted lungs and making queer faces. The two boys removed the masks, but that was not enlightening, because they had never seen either of the men before. The big Mexican had

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a wicked-looking scar across his left cheek, a mole on his nose and a piratical-looking mustache.

Tombstone sat down on the side of the bed, dangling the big Mexican's gun in his hand. It was a pretty weapon, all inlaid in silver, and with mother-of-pearl handles. Speedy yawned and looked at their captives.

"I wish folks would stay away and let me sleep," he complained. "Buttin' in thataway!"

"This'n had a pretty gun," remarked Tombstone. "The hole in it don't look half as big as it did at first."

"You out-smarted 'em," said Speedy with a grin. "Sayin' yuh got stuck with a tack! Pretty good idea."

"That's all the sympathy I expected," sighed Tombstone, "and it wasn't no trick—not to start with. I really stepped on a tack."

"Well, you shore ruined the party."

"Yeah, didn't I? When I looked at his two big feet on that rug, I got me a idea. Oh-oh, the big one's wakin' up."

The big Mexican was staring at them through slitted eyes, probably trying to remember when he went to sleep on that rug. He opened his eyes a little wider, and turned his head, looking along the floor.

"If yuh're lookin' for that tack, I got it," said Tombstone.

"*No entiendo*," muttered the man painfully.

"He didn't intend to," interpreted Tombstone.

"He means he don't know what's goin' on," corrected Speedy.

"*Si*," said the man. "Wheech happen?"

"Yuh better lay still until yuh get yore strength back," advised Tombstone. "I never shoot a weak person."

"*No entiendo*," insisted the man weakly. "Wheech happen?"

"You fell on yore head, *compadre*," said the grinning Speedy. "You busted yore *cabeza*."

"All right," said Tombstone severely, "we've talked plenty, *mi amigo*—it's yore turn. What was the idea of comin' in here and pokin' guns at us? Jist tell the truth, all the truth, and shame the devil. And don't say, '*No entiendo*.'"

The big one sat up slowly, looked around, glanced at his empty holster, and then saw the gun in Tombstone's hand.

"Those billong from me," he said huskily.

"Now, we're commencin' to get the truth," said Speedy. "Who are you, why did yuh come here tonight, and any other bit of information yuh happen to have in yore talk-box."

The burly Mexican had managed to absorb enough air to make him cognizant that something had happened to their plans.

Tombstone said, "How'd you like to talk a little?"

"I am eenocent from everytheeng," whispered the man. "I do notheeng. I can go now."

"Well, ain't you a optimist!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Set still! We'll tell yuh when yuh can go—and where."

"*Muchas gracias, senor*."

"Domb pippil!" snorted the big Mexican disgustedly.

"All right, wise person," said Speedy. "Who are you?"

"W'at deeference from a name? You don' know me. Pretty queek somebody keel you very died. You let me go from here—maybe you don' died yet, eh?"

"Hang that on a Christmas tree and say it's from Sandy Claus!" exclaimed Speedy. "Who's goin' to kill us except you?"

"You theenk I am alone?"

"Not with all four of us here. Who sent you here?"

STUBBORNLY the man shook his head. "*No entiendo*," he said quietly, licking his lips.

"What'll we do with this specimen?" asked Speedy. "My vote would be to shoot him, throw him in the back yard and go to sleep."

"Why keel me?" asked the big one.

Tombstone grinned. "You *entiendo* plenty of that, huh?"

"We'll make yuh a deal, Knot-Head," said Speedy. "Tell us who sent yuh here, and we'll turn yuh loose, after we prove it."

"Nobody have to send me," declared the big one. "I come by yourselves. Who you theenk I am?"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Somebody comin'."

They were prepared to repel invaders, but it turned out to be Shorty Ellis. He took one look at their two captives and yelped:

"Holy cow! Pablo Montora!"

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The big Mexican blinked painfully. Speedy said, "Worth anythin'?"

"Worth the undyin' thanks of Uncle Sam and Mr. Mexico. Montora is supposed to be the top-cutter of all the smugglers along this border. Guns, drugs, jewels and Chinamen. He's awful big—in a bad way. How do yuh feel, Pablo? And," Shorty took a deep breath and said, "what on earth are you doin' here?"

"*No entiendo,*" replied Pablo.

"We're all even then," declared Shorty. "What happened?"

They explained about the invasion, the tack on the rug, and their conversation with Montora.

"If Mr. Montora is such a big shot in this country, what's his idea of comin' across the Border and hoppin' onto a poverty-stricken cow spread?" asked Tombstone.

"We'll put a few ropes on this *pelicano,* and find out later."

With both captives roped securely, Shorty sat down and rolled a cigarette. Speedy said, "What's new in Palo Verde, Shorty?"

"They brought in some of the buckboard wheels," replied Shorty, "and Mike Bohlen, the village blacksmith, identified two of 'em as belongin' to me. He put new tires on 'em a couple weeks ago."

"How come you ain't in jail?" asked Speedy.

"I talked fast," grinned Shorty. "Yessir, I talked fast."

"Yuh didn't tell the truth, didja?" asked Tombstone.

"I had to. They had me where the hair is short."

"That implicates us, too," complained Tombstone. "It's too bad I wasn't with yuh. I'd have thought of somethin' to tell 'em."

"Yeah, I know," sighed Shorty. "Prob'ly got us all hung."

"They don't think we got that money, do they?" asked Speedy.

"I didn't ask 'em. Let's take the wagon and haul these here two *colorado maduro* orchids to town. If I ain't mistaken, we can sell 'em to the law for real money."

"Leesten!" exclaimed Montora. "You can' do those. I do notheeng wrongs."

"I offered yuh a deal," said Tombstone. "I said that if you'd tell us what yuh're doin' here, and who sent yuh, we'd turn yuh loose."

Montora shook his head, *"No entiendo."*

They hitched up Shorty's half-wild team to a lumber wagon, dumped Pablo Montora and his companion into the wagon-bed, and started for Palo Verde.

There was no seat on the wagon. Pablo and his companion in crime bounced around on some hay, while the other three hung to the sides of the wagon-box, or to each other, as Shorty sent that team careening through the big gate, skidding the wagon into the ruts of the rough road. Tombstone lost his grip on the wagon-box, grabbed Speedy, and they started a fast two-step.

Shorty yelled, "Stop dancin' and grab that brake!"

There was a pole-brake at the rear, but the brake-rope was waving in the breeze, out of reach of even Tombstone Jones. They surged through a dry-wash, bounced high on the opposite bank, with Shorty, his knees braced for dear life, trying to pull the jaws off the running team. [*Turn page*]

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Suddenly something loomed up in the road just ahead. In the moonlight Shorty's impression was that a number of people were jumping up and down in the middle of the road. Shots blasted at them, and the team whirled off the road, going sharply to the left, the wagon bounding high over rocks, mesquite, cactus. Tombstone's grip on the side of the wagon-box broke loose and he went sailing far over a wash-out, where he landed in soft sand and sharp cactus.

CHAPTER V

Two Prisoners

FOR several moments Tombstone was too short of breath to care what happened. He heard voices, several shots, and then silence. He flexed his arms and legs carefully, and found them workable. Slowly he got to his feet and braced himself against the bank of the wash, trying to get events straight in his mind. Evidently the team and wagon were far away by this time. He thought he had lost both his gun and his holster, until he found they were jammed inside the waist-band of his overalls, almost directly behind him, and very uncomfortable.

He unbuckled his belt and adjusted his artillery. His sense of direction was rather muddled. He stood there and stared at the sky, trying to orientate himself. Finally he said inanely, "I've been higher, but I don't reckon I ever went further."

He cupped his hands and yelled, "Speedy! Speedy, where are yuh?"

But there was no answer. He yelled Shorty's name, but no one replied. He said, "That covers everybody I can remember," and started walking.

A half-hour later, still somewhat dazed, Tombstone reached the road. Even in the half-light of a misty moon, he recognized that it was the road to Shorty's ranch. He sat down against a point of rock just off the road and rolled a smoke. He was trying to make up his mind whether to go back to the ranch, or go on to Palo Verde, when several riders went past, showering him with dust, heading toward the ranch.

In two or three minutes Shorty's team and wagon came along. Against the skyline he could see the silhouette of a Mexican sombrero on the driver's head. The team was not making very good time on the rough road, and as they went past, Tombstone ran out, caught the rear end-gate of the wagon-box, and pulled himself up.

Fumbling his way along the side of the wagon, he discovered the two trussed prisoners still in the wagon. The driver, unconscious of an added rider, only looked straight ahead, peering into the night and the dust-cloud. A moment later Tombstone rapped him sharply across the head with his six-shooter, and grabbed for the lines. The driver whirled half around, caught his legs against the side of the wagon-box, and fell down past the left front wheel.

Tombstone swung the team around in the brush, and headed back toward Palo Verde.

He said aloud, "When I catch 'em, they stay caught, y'betcha."

Slim Delaney and Injun Moon had just come from a conference with Judge Steele and Shelia Spears at the hotel. Shelia had refused to stay at the Rafter R, after Benton had moved in and taken charge. The judge had assured Shelia that Benton had no legal right to take over the ranch until he could produce the papers, showing ownership.

He said, "Mr. Benton was very negligent in not getting a copy of the signed papers. His receipt for seventy-five thousand dollars, signed by Henry Wagner, is not worth anything, as it does not obligate anyone, except Henry Wagner, now gone. In the morning I shall give the sheriff the proper papers to send this Mr. Benton packing."

They thanked the judge, took Shelia back to the hotel and went on to the office. It was getting late, and Slim said he was going to bed, when a team and wagon stopped in front of the office. They went to the doorway and saw Tombstone Jones, who limped painfully and seemed rather shopworn, but was still grinning.

"What's wrong now, Jones?" asked the sheriff quickly.

"Everythin' is jist fine and dandy, Sheriff," replied Tombstone. "Didja ever hear of a feller named Pablo Montora?"

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"Pablo Montora? I'll say we have! What about him?"

"What's he worth on the hoof?"

"Why—huh-h-h—"

"About five thousand dollars," replied Injun quickly. "Maybe more, I dunno."

"Well, sharpen yore pencil." Tombstone grinned. "I've got him and his pardner, all tied up in the wagon."

"You've got Pablo Montora?" gasped the sheriff. "Jones, you ain't jokin', are yuh. Why, Pablo Montora is a king-pin bandit."

Injun ran back into the office, picked up the small lamp and came back. The sheriff said, "I shore know Montora, the dirty coyote!"

They climbed into the wagon-box, where two grimy, dusty faces stared up at them, the mouths gagged with a piece of dirty shirt.

"You—you said Montora," whispered Slim.

"Yea-a-ah!" whispered Tombstone weakly. "I—I've been double-crossed! Speedy, you darned—huh!"

INJUN removed the gags from Shorty and Speedy, while the sheriff untied their ropes. Tombstone said, "How'd yuh do it?"

Speedy sat up, stared around and shook his head. "Funny thing," he remarked. "Last thing I remember, I'm shuckin' loose from that buckin' wagon—and here I am! Shorty, what do you remember?"

"Me?" asked Shorty in a husky whisper. "Stars. Shucks, I had both hands full of stars. Awful pretty ones, too. And there's Tombstone, standin' on his hind-legs. How'd you come out?"

"Forty feet in the air, sailin' like a bird," replied Tombstone. "Are you fellers hurt—much?"

"I got a lump on m' head," groaned Speedy. "Feels like I can wear two hats. How are you, Shorty?"

"Let's go into the office," suggested the sheriff. "We might as well talk this over. It shore looks funny to me."

"You should have been with us, if yuh think it was funny," remarked Tombstone.

They limped into the office. Shorty and Speedy sprawled on Injun Moon's old cot, while Tombstone told the story, beginning with the arrival of Pablo Montora and his two men. Shorty and Speedy were able to corroborate all of the tale, up to the time of the runaway. The last chapter, of which only Tombstone knew, seemed plausible.

The sheriff said, "I can't imagine Pablo Montora bein' there."

"I know that hairpin," declared Shorty, "and it was him."

"Why was he there?" asked Slim.

"*No entiendo,*" said Tombstone cheerfully. "At least, that's all he'd tell us. We had him all wrapped up for shipment, until them coyotes drove that runnin' team off the road."

"But it don't make sense," insisted Slim. "Why would Montora and his gang raid the Forty-Five ranch. Are you sure you three haven't been drinkin' too much Pasatiempo whisky?"

"No," replied Tombstone, "it wasn't whisky, 'cause we all saw the same thing."

"Well, anyway," remarked Injun, "yuh're a fine lookin' bunch."

"My gosh!" gasped Tombstone. "Before I got into that wagon, several riders went past, headin' for yore place, Shorty! We better get out there—*muy pronto!*"

"We'll be with yuh," offered the sheriff. "Start the wagon, and we'll overtake yuh."

"That's wishful thinkin', only," said Shorty. "C'mon, gang."

Shorty let the team run, but this time he kept them on the road, and they ran almost a dead-heat with the two officers. The ranchhouse was dark, no one in sight, but a lighted lamp disclosed the fact that the place had been thoroughly searched. Everything had been upset or torn apart. Even boards had been ripped off the floor. Bedding had been flung aside, an old mattress ripped apart. They searched the house, and came back to the main room, where they put the boards back on the floor.

"I'm beginnin' to believe yore story," said the sheriff.

"So am I," agreed Tombstone. "It's been awful hard, Sheriff."

They sat there and smoked, thinking it over, no one seeming to have any theory. Finally the sheriff said, "Yuh know what I think? Somebody has got the idea that you boys got that seventy-five thousand dollars."

"Yuh know what I think?" queried Tombstone.

"What?" asked Injun Moon.

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"I think that somebody's crazy. If we had that much money, do you think we'd stay in this place? Not me, my friend. I know some roulette-wheels that ain't had a good goin' over for a long time, and I'd like to work out a system of my own."

"How," asked Injun, "would Pablo Montora know about it?"

Slim shrugged; he couldn't answer that one. He said, "Well, somebody got it. We've searched every inch of ground out there at the grades, but we never found a cent of that money."

"Yuh see," explained Injun, "it ain't a case of jist stealin' a lot of money, but it means that Shelia Spears is broke. I'd hate to have that on my conscience."

"So would I," said Shorty.

"Think it over, boys," said the sheriff meaningly. "We'll go back, Injun. And another thing, any cowboy who tried to cash a thousand dollar bill wouldn't get far. The whole country is watchin' for one to be cashed."

"Thank yuh," said Speedy dryly. "We'll remember what yuh said."

AS Slim and Injun rode back to Palo Verde, Slim said:

"I'd give a lot to know what was in that telegram Jones got."

"Yuh would, Slim? Jist how much—in real money?"

"Injun," said the sheriff severely, "you ain't been pickin' up things that don't belong to yuh—again, have yuh?"

"Shucks, I just asked yuh how much you'd give. If I let you read it, that'd be compoundin' a felony—on yore part."

"That's right," agreed Slim. They rode along for a while, and Slim said, "I'd be willin' to compound one, Injun."

"Uh-huh," agreed Injun. "After all, we're the law, and they're a suspicious pair. Here she is."

Injun held a lighted match, while the sheriff read aloud, "'You are both fired'."

"That ain't suspicious—it's painful," said Injun.

"Signed by Jim Keaton. Injun, he's secretary of the cattlemen's association. Yuh don't mean—Na-a-a-aw! Them two never worked for any cattle association. They're too dumb!"

"Maybe that's why they got fired, Slim."

"How could they ever get a job to get fired from? I'll send Jim Keaton a telegram, and ask him why he fired them two. Yuh can't tell me that them two and Shorty Ellis don't know more about that money than they're willin' to tell."

"As far as that goes," remarked Injun, "if I had seventy-five thousand dollars in my pocket, I'd just as soon be dumb as the way I am."

"I don't reckon that much money would change yuh a bit, Injun."

"I mean I'd be willin' to be dumb for that much money."

"Yuh don't have to be willin'—nature takes care of that angle of it."

"And that," declared Injun, "has sort of a dirty ring to it, but I don't know just why. I'll think it over, Slim."

"Fine. And while yuh're thinkin' things over, just remember, when you pick up things that don't belong to yuh, it's stealin'."

"Aw, I was just helpin' out law and justice, Slim."

"That's all right, forget it. But be careful next time."

Out at the Forty-Five ranchhouse the three men were in bed, the door blocked, the windows covered. Shorty said, "Tombstone, do yuh reckon them house-wreckers will come back tonight?"

Tombstone yawned. "If they do, Shorty, they'll find that we're here first."

CHAPTER VI

Benton Is Angry

NEXT day Tombstone and Speedy went to Palo Verde with Shorty, curious to know what folks were talking about. They went into the Pasatiempo Saloon, where a rather fleshy person, well-dressed, redfaced and loud-mouthed, was treating several men at the bar, talking loudly. The three cowboys stopped near him. The man said:

"All right, all right! Maybe the judge is smart. Maybe the sheriff knows his business. But I contend that they have no right to force me off the Rafter R. It's none of my affair if Spears and the lawyer drive off into a canyon. I paid my money for the ranch; good, hard cash. Now, I'm ordered off the ranch. Is that justice?"

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"Judge Steele is a pretty smart man," remarked one of the men.

"Smart. Listen to me! I'm bringing in a lawyer who will make your judge sit up and yell 'uncle.' I sent him a wire a while ago. I'll show them what sort of a person Jim Benton is. I'll fight this all the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary."

James Madison Benton turned, a glass of whisky in his hand, and glared at the three cowboys who had just arrived.

"Yuh're Mr. Benton?" asked Tombstone quietly.

"I am, sir!" snapped Benton.

"Did you ever try a spoonful of sody in a glass of water?"

Benton glared at the tall cowpoke. "Spoonful of—what has sody got to do with this case?"

"Yuh're upset," said Tombstone. "Oh, yes yuh are. Yore chin kind of wiggles and yore face is as red as a ocotillo blossom. You better quit drinkin' whisky, and turn to sody. Might cut down on coffee, too. Bad for the heart, and yours is hardenin', I can see that."

James Madison Benton's face changed from mere red to a bright scarlet, and he seemed to be searching for words vitriolic enough to scorch the chaps off this presuming cowboy. Tombstone said:

"Now, now keep calm, Mr. Benton. No use bustin' a pump. I'll stay here until yuh remember what to say."

Tombstone leaned against the bar and began rolling a cigarette. Benton, his hand trembling, put the glass of liquor on the bar and walked out of the saloon.

"Dad-blame yuh!" wailed the bartender. "He owes me for two rounds of drinks!"

"Is that too bad?" asked Tombstone.

"'Course, it's bad! He's a rich man. Maybe he won't never come back in here again. You insulted him."

"It seems to me that he was insultin' yore judge and sheriff," remarked Tombstone. "None of yuh called him for that."

"The tall feller is right," said one of the men. "I didn't like the way Benton talked about the judge."

"Who pays for the drinks?" asked the bartender.

"Charge it to the dust and let the rain settle it," suggested Shorty, and they walked out of the saloon.

"You irked that bartender," said Shorty, "and you irked that Mr. Benton."

"I'm a first-class irker," grinned Tombstone, as they walked over to the sheriff's office.

They found Injun in the office, putting some new strings on his guitar. Shorty sat down on a corner of the sheriff's desk while Tombstone and Shorty argued with Injun over the way he was mishandling the new strings. Speedy's eyes strayed over the desk top, and came to rest on an opened copy of a telegram, sent to Jim Keaton. It said:

RUFE SPEARS RAFTER R KILLED IN WRECK POSSIBLY MURDERED AND SEVENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS MISSING. CHECKING SUSPECTS. WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT JONES AND SMITH. YOU WIRED ABOUT THEM THE OTHER DAY. ACTING SUSPICIOUS. WIRE COLLECT.

Speedy scratched his chin and looked thoughtful. Acting suspicious, eh? Injun was saying, "We chased Mr. Benton off the Rafter R this mornin', and Shelia went back there. Benton's sore as a untended boil. It was the only pleasant job I've had since Slim made me a deputy sheriff."

"Injun's kind of sweet on Shelia Spears," explained Shorty.

"Who ain't?" asked Injun.

"That's right," agreed Shorty. "For two whole weeks after I first seen her, I washed my neck twice a day. Why, some of the cowboys even bought toothbrushes. Prob'ly ended up by usin' 'em to put stove-polish on their boots, but they shore bought 'em."

INJUN set his guitar aside and looked at his watch. He said:

"We're holdin' the inquest in fifteen minutes, over at the courthouse, and you fellers are goin' to testify. C'mon."

"Ain't a private citizen got no right to his druthers?" asked Speedy.

"I'd testify, if they asked me to," warned Injun. "The law ain't nothin' to monkey with."

"Somebody," remarked Shorty, "should have told that to Slim Delaney, before he appointed you, Injun."

The old court-room was filled with spectators, but Injun piloted the three cowboys down to the front. Doctor Asher, with the assistance of Slim Delaney,

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presided. James Madison Benton was there, all dressed up, his face still red. The sheriff explained what the law knew about the case, and then they called Tombstone Jones, swore him to tell the truth, and sat him down in a chair. The coroner said:

"Mr. Jones, what is your business?"

"Business?" asked Tombstone.

"Yes. How do you make a living?"

"I," replied Tombstone expansively, "am a detective."

"A—a what?" gasped the coroner. "Mr. Jones, this is a serious investigation, and we do not care for humor."

"All right, I'm a cattleman."

"That is better, sir."

"Don't make up yore mind to that, until you've done both, Doc," advised Tombstone soberly, and the crowd grinned.

Doctor Asher looked at some penciled notes, adjusted his glasses and looked at Tombstone thoughtfully.

"On the night of the seventh of this month, Mr. Jones, you and your companion rode in a buckboard from Cabrizo with Shorty Ellis. Will you tell this jury exactly what happened."

"Not exactly, Doc. Yuh see, when I hit that hard grade on the seat of my pants, goin' a mile-a-minute, I wasn't interested on what was goin' on, but I shore was interested in what was comin' off. All I know is that when we got organized again, we didn't have no buckboard left. We found the horses and rode to Shorty's place."

"It has been said, Mr. Jones, that a shot was fired. Did you hear this shot?"

"Yeah, I did, Doc. It was either jist before, or durin' my flight. I heard the shot and I saw the flash."

"I see. And after you all recovered, were there more than three of you on the grade at that point?"

"Well, yuh see, Doc, when you hit that hard things kinda double up, on yuh. I saw several extras, but they all answered to the names of Shorty and Speedy. I'm sure it wasn't neither Mr. Spears nor Mr. Wagner who shot at us."

"On what do you base that supposition, Mr. Jones?"

"I'll tell yuh why, Doc. We stopped along that grade to open a bottle. Then a buckboard and team went past us, hellity-blip. After we had our drink, we went on, but nobody had the lines. That was jist an oversight on our part, and the team found it out. If that other buckboard hadn't stopped, we'd never have caught 'em, lines or no lines. We came around a point of rocks, awful fast, and hit somethin' right now. If it was their buckboard, and they was in it, can you imagine them takin' time to try and shoot one of us? I can't."

Doctor Asher turned to the six-man jury and said:

"Gentlemen, for your information, Mr. Wagner never carried a gun. We found Mr. Spears' gun, and it had not been discharged. In our opinion, and I include the sheriff, Mr. Spears and Mr. Wagner were held up by a man or men who wanted that money. It is possible that one of the holdup men fired at the oncoming buckboard, trying to force the team to veer aside. However, if you feel that this buckboard and team accidently knocked Rufe Spears and Henry Wagner into the canyon, it must be deemed an accident."

No more witnesses were called and, after a few moments of deliberation, the foreman got to his feet and said:

"Doc, we have decided that Rufe Spears and Henry Wagner were killed durin' a holdup, and ask that the case be investigated further."

THE funeral of the two men was held directly following the inquest, but Tombstone and Speedy stayed in town. At the Pasatiempo Saloon, the bartender introduced them to Jim Adams and Buck Thorne, two fairly salty looking gents, who walked outside with them and sat down on the shady porch.

Thorne said, "The bartender didn't mention it but we're two of the Border Patrol. We heard that Pablo Montora made a visit out to the Forty-Five Ranch, and had a run-in with you boys."

"Yeah, we entertained him a little," admitted Speedy. "Tied him and one of his *compadres* up, put 'em in a wagon and started for jail, but we got bushed and lost 'em both."

"Montora is a bad boy," said Thorne, "and we'd like to have him. He's the top-hombre of the biggest smugglin' ring along this part of the Border, and we can't figure what he'd be doin', takin' chances like that. Oh, we know about the missin' seventy-five thousand dollars, but it still don't make sense."

"Yuh mean, he wouldn't care for the

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money?" asked Tombstone.

"He'd love it. But comin' up here, takin' a chance on his neck, when the odds are a hundred to one that he'd never see the money, is different."

"Yuh mean, there's somethin' else behind it?" asked Speedy.

"There must be," said Thorne.

"Mebbe it was Montora's gang that held up Spears," suggested Tombstone.

"No, I don't believe it, unless some *Americano* figured out the deal. Montora is dumb."

"Yuh think he is?" asked Tombstone.

"Yeah, I'd say he was—comin' up here, takin' a chance on findin' a needle in a haystack. Well, we've got to be driftin', Speedy. See you boys later. If yuh ever get yore hooks on Montora again don't let him get away. He's worth a lot of money."

After they rode away Tombstone said, "Needle in a haystack! He was lookin' for somethin' bigger'n that. Nobody ever hunts for a needle. Why, even if he found one, what good—"

"You ought to remember Montora," interrupted Speedy. "You and him went to the same school."

CHAPTER VII

A Threat

IT WAS late when Tombstone, Speedy and Shorty got together at the Pasatiempo. They ate supper in town, and Shorty was a bit dubious about going back to the ranch at night. He was afraid that Montora or some of the gang might want to get even with them; so Tombstone and Speedy decided that they would all stay in town.

They engaged a room at the hotel, and went back to the Pasatiempo, where the general talk was about the inquest and the funeral. But the crowd didn't stay late, and at the fag end, only the three cowboys and the bartender were left. Tombstone wanted to play a game of pool, so the bartender said he would play one game, win, lose or draw and then close the place for the night.

The general store was open, so Speedy and Shorty went over to replenish their supply of tobacco. Tombstone and the bartender played two games, put away their cues, and Tombstone went hunting for Speedy and Shorty. The storekeeper, closing up, said that the two men had been there, bought tobacco and went out.

He added, "I wasn't payin' much attention, but I have a hunch that two men met them outside. I mean, I saw two other men and I think they all went away together."

Tombstone went to the hitch-rack, but only his horse was left there. He was sure that they would not ride away without him. He took his horse down to the livery-stable, awoke the stable-man, who said that they hadn't brought their horses to the stable. They were not in the hotel either. Tombstone went down to the sheriff's office, which was closed, no light showing.

He stood around outside the office, and heard Injun Moon call:

"What do yuh want out there?"

"Would yuh mind openin' the door? This is Tombstone."

Injun unlocked the door and lighted the lamp. Tombstone told him that Shorty and Speedy were missing, and while they were discussing a possible solution, Tombstone picked up a piece of paper on the floor near the door. He handed it to Injun, who held it close to the lamp. In penciled capitals it said:

JONES WE HAVE GOT ELLIS AND SMITH. DIG UP THAT MONEY. DROP THE PACKAGE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD AT THE FIRST SHARP TURN GOING TO PALO VERDE FROM THE 45 RANCH. IF YOU FAIL WE WILL KILL BOTH OF THEM. YOU HAVE UNTIL MIDNIGHT TOMORROW NIGHT.

THE MONTORA GANG

Injun read it twice and looked keenly at Tombstone.

"That's a funny thing, ain't it?" he asked.

"I've heard things that tickled me more," replied Tombstone.

"Yeah, I'll bet. Say, I know where that sharp turn is."

"Good!" exclaimed Tombstone. "You dump the money there."

"But I ain't got it, Tombstone."

"Well, neither have I. How am I goin' to drop what I ain't got?"

"And they'll kill them if yuh don't. Fine fix, eh?"

"This here deal," sighed Tombstone, "is gettin' more revoltin' every day. I'm jist afraid I'll have to go out and kill somebody."

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"Who?" asked Injun.

"I ain't decided, Injun. It takes me a long time to think things out."

"Yeah, I s'pose so. Let me keep that note and show it to Slim in the mornin'. You don't need it, do yuh?"

Tombstone shook his head. "No, I can remember everythin' that was in it. Good night, Injun."

Tombstone led his horse up the street, where he sat down on the high, wooden sidewalk and rolled a cigarette. The lights of the Pasatiempo were out, making the street quite dark. Tombstone realized that he was perfectly safe until tomorrow night at midnight. None of the Montora gang would molest him, as long as they believed he had that seventy-five thousand dollars cached away some place.

"Montora Gang!" he said, half-aloud. "Maybe Montora is workin' in the gang, but it's run by *Americano* brains."

He crushed the light of his cigarette against his chaps, and was about to mount his horse, when he heard a sound. Down the street about a block, a man had crossed the sidewalk, and Tombstone saw the dark bulk of him, moving toward the stable and feed-corral. There was nothing suspicious about it, but Tombstone mounted and rode down, where he could watch both sides of the corral. After a short wait, he saw a rider leave the rear of the stable, swing wide around the main street, heading west.

TOMBSTONE quickly rode back to the west, and trailed the lone rider who seemingly was heading for the Forty-Five. It didn't seem to make sense. Why did the man go out the back way and circle the town, he wondered. Not having an answer to that one, he rode back into the main street, dismounted and sat down again. After a few minutes a lone rider came into town and drew up at the sheriff's office. He could hear the person hammer on the office door, but he was too far away to hear any conversation.

He left his horse and went down an alley to the rear of the buildings and made his way down to the jail end of the sheriff's place, where a narrow alley led up to the sidewalk near the doorway.

Injun's voice was complaining, "But Slim's out there, watchin' the place, Shelia."

"Maybe we can find him," pleaded the girl. "I couldn't sleep, anyway. I'm sure that Benton lied about having that money stolen, and this is the proof."

"Well," said Injun," they shore kidnaped Shorty and Speedy, tryin' to force Tombstone to give it up. I dunno—it's all mixed up. Maybe Slim would have some ideas. Are yuh shore that's what he'd pack the money in, Shelia?"

"Absolutely. I'll bet Benton stole the money himself."

"Well, yuh may have a good idea there. I'll git my horse."

Tombstone hunkered in the alley and tried to figure out what this was all about. Slim Delaney was out there, watching the place, eh? That would mean that Slim was watching, waiting for Tombstone Jones to come back and dig up all that money. Fine thing!

He heard Shelia and Injun ride away, presumably heading for the Forty-Five. Tombstone wasn't interested in that money, but he was interested in finding Speedy and Shorty. Montora's Gang! If they kidnaped Speedy and Shorty, they'd head for Mexico. He went back to his horse, mounted and rode out of Palo Verde, intending to swing south and head for the Border, but something seemed to tell him to go to the Forty-Five.

Tombstone rode boldly, until he saw a light in the ranchhouse window, when he pulled up sharply. The only explanation was that Shelia and Injun had found Slim Delaney at the ranchhouse, and they had lighted a lamp in the main room. However, Tombstone Jones was not taking any chances. He took off his spurs and chaps, hung them on the saddle-horn, and tied the animal to an old fence, some distance off the road.

He came quietly back to the road and almost ran into a man who was slowly walking away from the house. The man failed to see Tombstone in the heavy darkness of the trees, and the tall cowboy sagged back until the man disappeared. He finally went on, rather puzzled over things, slid under a section of old fence, and crawled to within a dozen feet of the porch. The window had been covered, but he could hear the hum of conversation inside the room.

A man came up from down toward the stable, and another man met him on the porch. Tombstone heard one man say:

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"Well, I posted one man at the stable, and sent another down the road."

"Good idea," agreed a voice heartily. "We can't take a chance."

"Yuh're takin' plenty—with that girl, my friend."

"She walked in on it."

"I know she did, but foolin' with women is dynamite. My advice is to pack up everybody and head for Mexico. Down at the ranch we're safe for a few days, out here we're not. The minute folks learn the sheriff, deputy and that girl are missin' this whole country will ride."

"Yellow, eh? I thought you cowboys had nerve."

"We can take care of ourselves, my friend."

Another man came from the main room, banged the door behind him.

"What's eatin' you, Al?" asked one of the men on the porch.

"I'm through, Tex; headin' for Mexico. There's things I won't do—and kidnapin' women is one of 'em."

"Yellow, too, eh?" queried the other of the two men.

FOR several moments there was no sound, and then the one called Al replied:

"Benton, yuh're a city man. You've pulled all yore dirty deals in a city. Out here, we don't do it yore way."

"I'm running this deal," declared Benton. "I came here to take over the Rafter R, and I'm going to do it. The girl will sign a bill of sale for the ranch. There's nothing that can pin this deal on me. With the girl gone, sheriff, his deputy, and Speedy Smith, how would I know what happened? I'm supposed to be in the hotel, asleep."

"You forget about me," said Al. "I'm goin' to Palo Verde, pass the word, and head for Mexico. Keep on bein' the smart man from Chicago, my friend. When these rawhiders knot a rope under yore left ear, remember what I said."

"You mean—you're going to Palo Verde and—and talk?"

"Tell everythin' I know, Benton."

"Why, you—"

Tombstone heard a sharp curse, the scrape of feet, a blow, and the sound of a body thudding down on the porch floor. Then he heard Al's voice saying, "Better git smart and foller, Tex. *Adios.*"

Tombstone slid closer to the scene of action. The door was opened, and in the glow of light from the doorway, Tombstone saw one man on his hands and knees, trying to get up, Tex Wells leaning back against the porch-railing, as Poco Miller came out. The light was sufficient for Tombstone to identify all of them.

Poco Miller closed the door quickly.

"What happened, Tex?" he asked.

"Al's headin' for Mexico. Benton tried to stop him, and Al batted him down."

Benton was cursing, fumbling. Then he said, "Where's my gun!"

"I got it when yore head hit the wall," replied Tex.

"Well, give it to me!"

"No, I don't reckon I will, Benton. I like you better when yuh're de-horned. You won't talk so big, and you won't threaten anybody."

Benton started to protest, but Tex said, "Shut up, Benton! What did you say, Poco?"

"I said that this is a losin' game, Tex. I don't like Benton. Even if he did get the Rafter R, and all that, I wouldn't

[*Turn page*]

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trust him. His talk about millions to be made in smugglin', usin' the Rafter R as a headquarters, don't look as big as it did. His mistake was in not playin' a square game with Rufe Spears and Henry Wagner. No, he had to play smart, rob 'em, steal everythin' and kill 'em both.

"Well, he didn't get the money nor the papers. Now, he's tremblin' in his boots for fear Tombstone Jones or somebody else will dig up that money. Yeah, I'm talkin' about you, Benton. Now, you'd force that girl to sign a bill of sale for the Rafter R. Yuh're stuck. The sheriff, deputy, Smith and Ellis know yore game. You'd have to murder all of 'em to keep yore own neck out of a loop. Me, I'm follerin' Al, Tex. I don't even want to know what happens here. *Adios.*"

"Good luck, Poco," said Tex quietly. Poco stopped and said:

"Benton, for yore own information, I had a talk with the two of Montora's men who went out to stand guard, and they kept right on goin'. Their own country looked good to them."

Benton cursed impotently, but Tex only laughed shortly.

"Yellow pups," complained Benton. "I'll get even with them."

"You ain't goin' to get even with anybody, Benton. We're goin' in there and turn everybody loose. I'll make a deal with the law to give me five minutes head start. If Montora opens his drunken mouth, I'll blast his teeth out. I'm like the rest of the boys, I'm agin wholesale murder. Understand, Benton?"

Benton's reply came in a pistol blast. Tombstone heard Tex Wells crash back against the flimsy railing, and go through. Benton's snarl was triumphant.

"You poor fool!" he said. "Didn't you ever hear of a sleeve-gun? Well, if you lived long enough, you did. You're not running this deal."

CHAPTER VIII

Tombstone's Winning Hand

BENTON flung open the door and walked in. He slammed the door behind him, but it rebounded open about a foot. Tombstone heard Pablo Montora's voice, swearing in Spanish.

"W'at go on!" the Mexican said. "Nobody answer me! I seet here, watch everybody, but I don' know notheeng. Who you theenk I am—peon? I am leader!"

"Shut up!" snapped Benton angrily. "I'm running this game. Sneed and Miller ran out on us, and I killed Tex Wells. I don't want any quitters in my outfit. Your two trusted guards have pulled out on us, Pablo. We're all that's left. Time is short."

Pablo Montora didn't like that news. He said, "You are escare, too?"

"I'm not afraid of anything, you fool. We clean up here, you go to Mexico, I stay—and take the Rafter R. In a little while we will get together and start in business."

"*Buena,*" said Montora quietly. "We tak' all those folks to *Mejico,* eh?"

"Don't be crazy, Pablo. We can't handle it that way. Wait! Find me a sheet of paper and ink. I want a paper from this young lady before I forget it. I dote on notes from pretty girls."

Tombstone shoved the door open very quietly and stepped into the room. Slim Delaney and Injun Moon were roped to chairs, while Shorty, Speedy and Shelia were roped and tied, sitting together against the wall. They all saw Tombstone, but none could make a sound, because they were gagged. Speedy had only one eye visible above the dirty towel.

Benton and Montora were looking through the drawer of the old table, searching for pen and ink. Shorty could have told them that he had none.

"I've got to have ink!" rasped Benton angrily. "I tell you, a pencil won't do, Pablo."

Tombstone was standing there, perfectly relaxed, a gun in his right fist.

"Aw, use a pencil—it won't make any difference," he said.

For a space of several seconds neither man moved, Tombstone could see the rise and fall of Montora's huge shoulders, as he breathed deeply, but Benton's body never showed a quiver.

Suddenly Montora acted. He grasped Benton in both hands, whirled in front of him, and sent Benton staggering back, straight at Tombstone. With the same motion Montora dropped to his knees, whirled and fired one shot—fired

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blindly, straight at Benton, who blocked Montora's view of Tombstone Jones.

Tombstone had to jump aside to prevent Benton from falling into him, and at the same moment he snapped a shot at Montora. Montora's gun went spinning, and he screamed painfully. Tombstone's bullet had broken the big bandit's arm near the elbow, and he sat there, hugging his arm and gushing forth tears. Benton had not moved.

Tombstone reached down and plucked a short-barreled gun from inside the waist-band of Benton's trousers, and put it in his pocket.

Then he picked up Montora's gun, ignoring his moans, and proceeded to cut the captives loose.

Speedy was the first to get his breath, and he blurted:

"Good gosh, it took yuh long enough to git here, seems to me!"

Tombstone grinned and looked at Slim Delaney.

"Hyah, sheriff," he said calmly. "I heard yuh came out here to catch me with all that money."

Slim Delaney massaged his sore lips, spat painfully and said in a husky whisper, "I'm glad yuh did, Jones. We're all glad. That Benton person is a madman."

"Was," corrected Tombstone. "Howdy, Miss Spears."

"God bless you!" she replied weakly.

Shorty said, "How'd yuh do it, Tombstone? How'd yuh know where to look? They wasn't expectin' yuh. Poco Miller waited in town until he figured you'd got that note under the sheriff's door, and then he came here, sayin' he was sure you'd pulled out for Mexico."

"Leave it to Mr. High-Pockets to do it backwards," said Speedy. "He ain't reliable, he ain't, but I love every knot on his head."

"I'm beginnin' to develop some affection for him, too," declared Injun Moon. "Tombstone, don't you realize that they *had* to kill all of us, if you hadn't showed up right now."

"Yeah." Tombstone nodded soberly. "Yuh know, I was wonderin' what sort of a lookin' angel Speedy'd make. The thought is revoltin'."

SLIM DELANEY was making an examination of Benton, and then he went out and made a match-light examination of Tex Wells. They were both dead. Montora was still moaning over his broken arm, but no one was in any hurry to get medical assistance.

The sheriff said, "So Poco Miller and Al Sneed pulled out, eh?"

"They couldn't stand for the deal, Slim," replied Tombstone. "Tex was a square shooter when the chips were down. He was killed because he said he was goin' to let everybody loose."

"Good for Tex," said the sheriff quietly. "I'll admit that I came out here, Jones. If you dug up that money—well, I wanted to know more than anybody was willin' to tell. I'm sorry."

"Yuh see," said Injun, "Shelia came to the office and woke me up, after you was there, Tombstone. She'd found the valise that her dad always carried. He took it to Cabrizo that day but she found it at the ranch tonight. It showed that somebody brought it from that smashup in the canyon. It's there on the floor."

Tombstone picked it up and stared at it. Speedy was staring at it, too. It was a little, rather battered, yellow valise.

Tombstone said, "Well, I—huh! Hey! I had a—Speedy, take a look at this!"

Speedy said, "I'd have swore it was the same one!"

Tombstone dropped the valise and went galloping outside.

Slim Delaney said, "What's eatin' him, Speedy?"

"Wait!" exclaimed Speedy. "He'll be back. Shorty, you remember?"

"That little valise?" asked Shorty. "Shore, I do. You was kiddin' him about it."

Tombstone was back, the little valise in his hand. They crowded around him, as he opened it. Speedy said, "That ain't yore valise! Yours had brass knobs on the bottom corners."

Inside the opened valise was a hefty bundle of what seemed to be currency. On the very top was a one-thousand dollar bill, but the rest was only blank paper, cut to size and with discolored edges.

Tombstone lifted his head and stared around the circle.

"I hung it on a nail in the stable," he said. "Shucks, I thought it was my valise. Little heavier—mebbe. Reckon I had too much to drink that night to notice the weight."

Slim Delaney said, "I can see now. Listen! Benton tricked your father and Wagner, Shelia. All they got was that one bill, and a lot of cut paper. The gang

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had to steal it back, but after the crash they got the wrong valise. Benton knew that if anybody found that valise, it would prove his crooked scheme. Now, if we only knew what became of those papers they lost, everything would be clear."

Injun dug deeply into his hip-pocket and came up with a handful of tightly folded papers. He placed them on the table, and said:

"The day we went out to find Rufe Spears and Hank Wagner, I found them papers, Slim. Maybe I compounded a felony, I don't know, but I wasn't goin' to let Shelia get beat out of everythin', not if stealin' would help her."

SHELIA took the papers and held them tightly in both hands.

"Thank you, Harrison," she said. "You are wonderful."

"Harrison!" snorted Shorty. "Try and live that down, will yuh?"

Slim Delaney drew a deep breath of relief, started to say something to his deputy, but stopped and drew an envelope out of his pocket. He said, "Jones, this telegram came for you just before I left town."

Speedy stepped over and took it, tore open the envelope and read the telegram aloud:

"'IGNORE MY TELEGRAM. STOP ACTING SUSPICIOUS. SPEARS MEMBER ASSOCIATION. TRY YOUR LUCK ON CASE BUT DON'T INTERFERE WITH THE SHERIFF. CONFIRM RECEIPT OF THIS WIRE AND ACCEPTANCE.'"

"Huh!" grunted Tombstone.

"We've got our job back!" exclaimed Speedy.

"Yea-a-ah, but I don't like them conditions," complained Tombstone. "Actin' suspicious, huh? Luck, huh? Don't interfere with the sheriff, huh? Speedy, you wire Jim Keaton to come down and handle his own case. I ain't interested."

"But the case is finished!" exclaimed the sheriff.

"Well, why can't he be satisfied? Wirin' us orders! Yuh know somethin'?" Tombstone reared up his full height and looked around.

"Some day," he continued, "Jim Keaton is goin' to re'lize that I've got all the brains I can use."

"Sometimes," said Speedy dryly, "I wonder if yore head ain't jist a little overcrowded."

Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith tangle with the ghost of Paradise Valley when they take the trail of a fortune in diamonds—in one of the most hilarious and exciting adventures of this rollicking pair of range detectives! Look forward to—

HIDDEN LOOT ON THE BORDER

by

W. C. TUTTLE

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Jerry caught and shot two rustlers up in the Cowback Pass

When The COPES QUIT RUNNING

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

JERRY Cope rode down the slope off the Cowback Range. He had bad news for his father, Judson Cope. Horsemen had raided their C-C mountain pasture and driven forty head of steers up over the pass. The rustled beefs had been gone since before the heavy rain of the week before. This wasn't the first time raiders had taken serious bites out of the Cope & Cope herd. Indeed, the Copes had counted on those prime steers for their annual sale. Now there would be much too little money realized to help pay off the $8,000 mortgage they owed the Shorthorn Bank.

Jerry was his father's partner—just a boy, but nevertheless a tophand rider for the outfit. Judson Cope had been a tinhorn gambler until on one unforgettable night, playing in luck as he never had before, he came through with a stake of $10,000 in cash. Then he had quit, invested in that outfit at the head of Cowback Basin, and stocked it on borrowed money with high grade Herefords.

Jerry, active and full of ginger, not only worked the pasture during the summer but all winter long he ran fur lines, trapping. That meant a good winter income, for the Cowback Mountains were a fur pocket, and Jerry knew his marten, fox, otter, mink and other furbearers. So far the fur take was greater than the return from the beef. But as yet the Copes hadn't borrowed living expenses. Instead, Judson Cope had cached a good stake high up in the hills for that proverbial rainy day. The

As long as Jerry Cope could remember he and his dad had been on the move, but the time comes when a man must face his fear!

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money was saved from Jerry's fur trapping.

Jerry was thinking about that gold and paper horde as he came down the creek valley bottom, bringing the bad tidings that instead of selling cows, they'd have to draw on the cache to meet the mortgage.

NO SMOKE was coming from the kitchen chimney, Jerry noticed. His father should be expecting him. Jerry had been riding the back pasture since dawn checking the cattle feeding on the lush grass around the beaver ponds which were the hidden asset of the C—C spread. It was Jerry who had cinched the bargain buy for his dad when he discovered the abundance of highly sought after fur-bearing animals, as well as the grass roots water table in a high, dry hill.

A chill seemed to have settled on the stone and log cabin there on the creek bench. The absence of the brown coal smoke was ominous. Jerry checked the eager hurry of his horse, searching the scene.

He saw tracks of strange horses—two or three days old. He thought they had been made by wandering cowboys looking for a place to hang their hats. The C—C needed two or three men, but father and son had teamed up like five or six men, doing all the necessary work, no matter how hard, how straining, how long the hours.

Two horsemen had come from the cabin. Their horses were long geared, easy stepping, ridden by active men. The tracks were old.

Jerry had been away from the ranch, stopping in his trapline cabins, for three nights. A professional wildcrafter, he read sign like a handbook; bare ground or snow. He saw anxiety, haste to escape in the fading trail the two men had made up toward the pass he had followed down.

He jumped from his saddle and felt dread as he found the kitchen door ajar. No one was in the kitchen except a porcupine that had come in, lured by the desire for salt. Jerry ran into the main room of the cabin and in the living room stretched face down on the floor was his father, Judson Cope. In his back were two bullet holes, four or five inches apart. Blood was all around on the matched-board flooring in a dark, dried-up pool.

The killers had ransacked the desk, pulled away the balsam-bough bunk mattresses, searched hastily for money. They had yanked Judson's .22 caliber snake gun from his holster and tossed it contemptuously into a corner. They had found little they regarded as valuable.

Leaning against the door jamb, Jerry Cope braced himself against the aching weakness of his sorrow and helplessness.

Neverthless, wildcrafting expert that he was, rigid in hateful surprise, one by one he noted each detail. The most cowardly was the fact that his father had been shot in the back. Turning him over to look at his face, Jerry saw that there was no anger, no pain, no fear in the expression fixed by death—his father's face was a mask of surprise.

On the card kitty-table were several decks of pasteboards. Judson Cope, gambler turned rancher, had continued his skills. He had taught his son all that he knew about cards and gambling.

When the lad's mother had died, Judson had given her his promise to give Jerry a chance for a respectable life—and for years the boy had attended cow-camp, mine-town and railroad division public schools. He had worked for farmers, dairies, and ranches—handy-boying. When the elder Cope was broke one winter, Jerry had spent the hunting and trapping season from October to May with an old trapper who taught the lad tracks and runways, trap and snare sets and water and high line trapper methods. Judson had given the boy not only his own skills, but had given the boy a chance to do things his father never had done.

Now standing there, all these memories coalesced in Jerry Cope's mind. From active, happy, competent youth he changed in minutes to the full realization of independent manhood. On the floor lay the inert remains of his father. Judson Cope had from childhood, fair-warned the lad that a day would come, when he must stand alone.

Now Jerry saw that his father had always expected death. Time and again when Judson Cope seemed settled down for a long run, dealing for a house, running a shift, having his own table on shares or lease, Judson would suddenly quit, come scurrying to Jerry, and they would ride away. His father never told him the reason for these sudden flights. Always they had been ready for instant

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departure. For years, it seemed to Jerry, they had been running away.

Now Jerry reflected, the flight had ended. At last, his father had been caught and shot down. This remote ranch had failed to hide Judson Cope from whatever enemies he had. Only now the son realized the fact that his own lifetime had been spent trying to leave something behind—not going somewhere. To Jerry the ranch had meant arriving in an honest, happy, profitable home. To his father it must have been his last hope of refuge.

STANDING there, he realized the inescapable duty he owed his father in this last extremity. Jerry mustered his courage to action. On him fell the need of summoning the law. He must make sure those murderers were brought to justice. No detail by which they could be traced and captured could go unobserved.

In the living room one thing was conspicuously missing. Judson Cope had kept through thick and thin a silver-plated, pearl-handled, specially engraved revolver. Judson always wore a brown-barreled, fast-draw pistol in a hand tooled scabbard on a Pendleton mahogany belt for his own personal insurance. The gorgeous weapon was just for show. It carried the initials, BT.

BT stood for Blot Tinn, as Jerry had learned picking up bits of information about the gun here and there. Old Blot Tinn was a noted rancher whose range was to the north of the C—C place. Howcome Judson Cope had that fancy, $150 dollar Colt Jerry didn't know. Now it was the only thing missing that Jerry could see. The gun—and of course, those steers which had been driven through the pass.

Jerry backed out of the living room and went into the yard. He studied those horse tracks. The killers had come south to the ranch, and watered at the trough. They had gone into the living room—and the two bullets that had killed Judson Cope were sticking in a hewn-plank partition beyond the card table a few feet from the big pigeonhole desk in the corner, at about the level of the dead man's belt.

There it was, plain as could be! Whoever had done the killing had drawn his gun, aimed from the shoulder level and fired twice, quickly. Deliberate, treacherous, premeditated murder! Jerry looked at the lamps and they were all full of oil, the chimneys clean. It was a day-time assassination. Judson Cope hadn't known what hit him—perhaps not why.

Jerry Cope brought in a wagon tarpaulin cover. He spread it on the floor. He lifted his father over onto it, shoulders first, then his legs. The body was stiff. He folded the tarp over, first one side, then the other. He brought down the head end, brought up the foot end, snug. Then he looped a long stake rope around ankles, knees and hips, brought the arms tighter to the sides and tied in the tarp around the neck. He didn't hurry; he worked carefully, now and again wiping his eyes in the crook of his elbows.

He rode out on his saddle horse and brought in two harness broke cross-bred horses and hitched them to the long buckboard. He laid a bearhide on the spring planks and carried out that bundle he had wrapped with such neat carefulness. Lashing it fast to ring staples, he hung his rifle boot on the driver's seat and fastened up the reins of his saddle horse so it could run free. He gave the animals a drink at the trough, took a drink himself, and headed off down Cowback Basin trail toward Shorthorn. The court town was at the other end of the Basin, near the county line. The sun was going down in a blaze of shifting clouds and sweeping wagon-spokes of darting sunbeams when he started his sorrowful journey.

All night long Jerry Cope drove, his saddle horse circling around, sometimes ahead, sometimes lagging behind. Driving was something to do. Tense in anguish and bewilderment, the driving nevertheless gave him a chance to think. He could put together innumerable trivials of memory and circumstance.

"He was my father!" Jerry clenched his teeth, "He was the man who taught me all of living, taught me things he never had done himself. My father—Dad—father and mother both to me!"

IN THE false dawn, pale streaking lights in the high skies, he was in the straightaway. By sunrise he was starting up the vast slope in the midst of which was Shorthorn, like a tiny toy town. As the county seat came to wakefulness, Jerry Cope hitched his team and

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saddle horse to the courthouse tie-rail.

The sheriff, Miles Guerdon, standing in front of the building, turned to gaze at the twisting features of the youth. His face became grim when he saw that long, gray bundle lying on the bearskin, tied fast to the buckboard planks.

"Why, son," Guerdon exclaimed. "Yuh look like yuh're bringing bad news from the C Bar C?"

"Yes, suh, Sheriff Guerdon!" was the reply," I found my Dad, Judson Cope, shot twice in the back—in our living room at the ranch!"

Miles Guerdon turned to a deputy, "Call the doc—come on, son, I want to know all about it!"

When Jerry finished his narrative, Sheriff Guerdon asked; "Yuh say nothing was missing?"

"Why—" Jerry hesitated, "they ransacked everything. Emptied boxes and the square commercial traveler's trunk. They pulled out papers in the pigeonhole desk. They missed the secret compartments, though. Our deeds and papers were there."

"Judson never told yuh he had enemies?"

"No, suh—never!"

"Yuh never knowed anybody was sworn to kill him, Jerry?"

"Why—why—" Jerry hesitated. Sheriff Guerdon knew something—Judson Cope had fled from something, someone it was now clear. "I never knew what," Jerry admitted. "We moved about, right often. That was when we were on the road. Dad wasn't afraid. No braver man ever lived. It was just that he didn't want trouble, I reckon. He never told me much. "

"No, he wasn't a coward," the sheriff said slowly. "Yuh knew how he got that stake for the ranch?"

"Cards," Jerry nodded.

"Nerve—not just cards!" the sheriff squinted. "Yuh don't reckon yuh can handle that C Bar C outfit do yuh?"

"If'n yuh don't go after those murderers, I will!" The youth was bitter.

"I'm glad yuh said that, boy!" the sheriff exclaimed. "It's quite a job, handling that ranch—settling up Judson's estate! Get that done."

They buried Judson Cope there in Shorthorn. Just a few people had known the man—a gambler turned rancher. Getting killed the way he had attracted a lot of attention. Dead, Judson Cope was a lot more important than he had been living. His son profited in this increased interest and respect. Jerry went to President Grouper of the Shorthorn Bank, and told him the exact situation.

"We've got cattle to ship that'll pay the interest next autumn," Jerry said. "I'm asking a lot—but I'll hire help stacking our alfalfa and wild hay. That new rabbit-fence is a profitable improvement, too. But I've got a couple of bad problems. Who killed my dad? And who run off forty head of prime steers ready to ship this autumn?"

"Cows stolen?" Grouper asked sharply.

"I counted them in our winter loss," Jerry explained. "It's small, compared to anybody in this county. We got good winter cover."

"Didn't yore dad gamble taking that outfit?"

"We discounted everything," Jerry admitted. "Dad was always a gambler. Just naturally, he took chances. I'd been better satisfied if we'd borrowed four thousand instead of eight. If you say so, I'll undercut the herd, trim everything, pay up much as possible. It'll set me back a lot of years, but if I haven't any credit— Our beef is quality though, not a big herd but prime."

"I wanted your ideas, Jerry," the banker said. "A big ranch is better than a nester for Shorthorn."

The bank decided to risk carrying the junior partner of Cope & Cope. Jerry hired Pete Larsen, a youth like himself, with three horses of his own, to ride range—do cowboy work. Back on the ranch, Jerry faced the fact that he did not know where his father cached the backlog of fur money which Jerry had accumulated on the highline fur trapping. But only Jerry knew that the cache existed—enough to pay the mortgage, probably.

The cowboy, Pete Larsen, rode the pasture of mountain side and broken lands, keeping track of the scattered beef. Jerry worked around the home buildings doing the work of cook, fence builder and repair man. In the autumn the two drove what little prime beef there was to ship to the railroad, and that made up the interest on the note, furnished money for supplies and paid Pete's wages. President Grouper of the bank looked after the figuring, and saw

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with approval that the C—C outfit wasn't any deeper in debt.

Winter was coming. Jerry knew he would face that long vigil alone. Apparently he would spend the months from late October to late April or early May huddled before the fireplace in the ranch house. But instead he ran his traplines through the tall timber along the Cowback ridges, glad that he and his father had kept that resource secret. In spare hours he had gone up to the foot of the miles-long rock cliffs, searching for the hidden cache of fur money.

One major temptation confronted Jerry. He had sold his catch of furs to a buyer named Mack Logan, from over the mountains. Logan had asked Jerry if there weren't muleskins back there in the Cowbacks.

"Yes, but they store up the water that keeps our pasture lush!" Jerry had answered, "Of course they ain't legal to trap and sell."

"Don't let them get too plentiful, so that they don't have enough to eat and starve. That would shore be too bad." Logan winked slightly at the young man.

JERRY remembered that muleskins meant beaver, which were protected by law at $200 fine per pelt, and 6 months in jail if caught. But no wild life protector had ever been in the far-away Cowbacks. Jerry knew he could add $1000 at least to his winter take if he trimmed the beaver in the ponds up the canyon bottoms. That would pay the interest, and take something off the debt the C—C owed the bank; and what was the risk?

Fleshing and stretching mink, muskrat, marten, wildcat, fox and other pelts in the warmth of his living room before the blazing hearth, Jerry mulled over the invitation to take illicit muleskins.

"They're stealing my cows—that's violating!" he told himself. But his father had quit gambling clean. He had trained Jerry in all the tricks of the games, yet they were to protect the youngster, not enable him to cheat players. Jerry decided not to touch the beaver right then.

When his winter fur work was done, he sat at the card table for hours and played, practiced, added to his skill at the various games. He put together all his memories of his father's flight—his own knowledge, the things banker Grouper had said and Sheriff Guerdon's mysterious hints. The theft of the fancy silver-plated revolver was significant because better weapons for the business of shooting had not been taken from the Cope place. Just that tiny weapon with the BT brand.

Off yonder Blot Tinn was a fabulous character, a big-time rancher who had incredible holdings, who ran a score of brands, who held all the Capron Hole range, and held sway over half a hundred small outfits like the Cope & Cope ranch. Outfits from whom Blot Tinn summoned riders for his gigantic spring and fall roundups.

Jerry Cope's beef wintered well. He had made a big take from fur, more than during any previous prime season. When the March rains came and the melted snow backed up in the uncounted beaver ponds, seeping out into the watertables and underground springs, Jerry caught muskrats, otter and mink. But he refused to take beaver, a hundred or so of which could have been spared from the pond colonies. When he sold to Logan, the fur buyer shrugged, shook his head—no muleskins!

On his way back over the Cowbacks, Jerry found tracks of seven head of steers coming down the trail out of the pass. Two horsemen had picked up that beef and rustled them out into Capron Hole. That bunch of forty head taken when his father was alive was just a part of the stealing that was going on now that the well-wintered C—C cattle were back up those canyons.

The Copes had found what seemed to be a bargain in that old, well built, well located ranch. Because it had been abandoned for many years they had found mavericks here and there along the timber fringes and in the canyon valleys. Now Jerry realized that the ranch had failed because thefts bled the outfit of its potential profits. Cattle rustlers were robbing him contemptuously—"nothing but a kid-nester!" he could hear them say.

Jerry Cope faced the facts. His father had run away from something. He had been cornered and killed at last. Over in Capron Hole country—Blot Tinn's vast domain—the stolen cattle were being held, but it seemed incredible that the great Blot Tinn would stoop to taking a youth's cattle—intentionally.

Angrily, with the impetuosity of stal-

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wart youth, Jerry Cope outfitted for a trip over into Capron Hole. His cattle, those few he had left, were doing all right. He packed a short-back horse with a wildcrafter's outfit and headed for Blot Tinn's domain on another bronc. Circling wide, he came down in Capron Hole from the north. He knew from reading the Shorthorn *Register* that wolves and coyotes were raising hob with calves, colts and venison over in the big basin. He rode down to the main Blot Tinn outfit.

The old boy himself, big and powerful, scarred and grayed by lifelong efforts of daring, gambling undertakings, had a week's growth of grizzly whiskers on his face, as he sat on the wide front veranda of his main house and glared at his two-horse visitor. His eyes, greenish jade, examined the gear carried by the pack-horse. Several No. 4 Kangaroo jump traps, coils of smoked copper snare and tie wire, a short-handle ax in a sheath, a neatly lashed saw-buck and a tarp wrapped pack.

"Who do yuh think you are?" growled Blot Tinn.

"I'm Buck Pardy," Jerry answered, "everywhere I hang my hat!"

"Just a loafin', shiftless, wuthless trapper, eh?"

"I'm a wolf trapper," Jerry answered, "Yuh're overrun with wolves, coyotes and cougars. Even wildcats are eatin' yore calves—and yuh let them!"

"Hey-y— Who yuh talkin' to?"

"Blot Tinn, by the looks of yuh!" the wildcrafter grinned." If yuh want to get rid of some of those cow killers, I'll do the trick—seventy-five a month, found and the bounties are mine. Skins won't be worth much—summer takes are all shedders, no fur."

"Heck—seventy-five a month!" Blot Tinn's voice rose in a shriek, thin and sharp, "I pay forty for tophands!"

"Suit yourself!" the trapper shrugged. "If yuh'd ruther feed wolves and cougars than somebody that handles the varmints, that's yore foolishness. So long, Mister Tinn! Glad I met yuh!"

A LIFT of his hand and his horses surged on their way.

"Hey—hold on! Have dinner—I smell the roast. No hurry," the old boy hollered. "Bait yore horses and take off their rigs. Spend the night!"

Buck Pardy hesitated, looking down the long grade into Capron Hole. Then he nodded. "Sure 'nough!" he said. "Yuh got plenty of cougar feed!"

Off in the Hole colts and calves ranged along with bands of mares with stallions. There were more than a hundred square miles of prosperous range; the far flung Blot Tinn domain.

The trapper hung up his saddle, dumped his pack on the storehouse platform, washed his head in the trough, and dried himself with a big towel. Then he headed for the house.

"Sit!" the rancher ordered. "Which way'd yuh come?"

"Down from Milk River," Jerry answered. "Judith River—spot trappin' along. Thought I better be moving down—"

"Runnin'?"

"Naw-w— Walkin' out. Damned fur-buyer talked—"

"Muleskins?"

"Now, Mister, ask me no questions an' I'll tell yuh no lies." The visitor shook his head. "Good winter so I thought I'd summer hunt."

"How about stayin' here!"

"I saw two cougars eatin' a yearling sorrel when I was ridin' in—Dog-Tent brand."

"Didn't yuh shoot 'em?" Tinn demanded.

"I seen No Trespass signs—No Huntin'!" Jerry chuckled, shrugging. "Heard yuh was raising circus animals so I didn't shoot them cougars."

"Now who the hell said that?" Tinn demanded, "I'll run him—"

Jerry shook his head. "I said too much," he admitted.

On the following morning, Blot Tinn bargained the trapper into stopping over a month or so. In a week, the trapper brought in two cougars, five lobos and twenty-two coyotes. He had taken more in bounties in seven days than his wages would come to in three months.

Now Buck Pardy, alias Jerry Cope, could ride far and wide, into the far back bottoms and hideout pastures. He discovered more than one hundred C—C steers, a few cows and yearlings. The brands hadn't been blotted.

Jerry Cope knew now who had stolen the C—C beef.

Blot Tinn told the trapper-hunter to take a rider along to do the skinning and stretching of the unwieldy cougar

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and wolf hides. The old boy hadn't realized his pasture and mountain sides were so overrun with a thousand head of meat-eaters. In this once safe refuge the coyotes, and even the big wolves, had forgotten half their cunning, and they ran their necks into snares, paws into steel jaws, ate poison pills and forgot to dodge when rifle sights lined up with them.

Over on the west side of Capron Hole was an old homestead known as the Cope Place. Trim Cope, Jerry's grandfather, had built up a homestead into a nester outfit, and had established the makings of a ranch. Trim was the first man to bring in short-legged, wide-beamed, small-boned quality Herefords. His cattle made the thin-bodied, big boned, scrawny Tinn cows look cheap and look to be the tough old canners that most of them were.

"Old Tinn picked a row with Trim," an old cowboy who was riding with Jerry said, "Blot, he just naturally killed that feller. Claimed self-defense and got away with it. It happened this way. They met over on that trail in the Trim Hollow pass. Trim didn't even know it was fight till Blot drawed. Blot had three riders along. They might have talked—he killed two of 'em, an' the other lit out. No witnesses."

One day Blot Tinn dressed up to go to town. He wore a fancy embossed belt and holster and in the holster was a fancy revolver—pearl handle, engraved, silver plated. It was the pistol that had been stolen that day when Judson Cope was shot in the back down in the Cope ranch.

Jerry Cope had worked fast, shooting, snaring, trapping and poisoning. Old Blot Tinn was proud to admire the clean up of predators. He vouchered the bounties to the county treasurer over at Stone Springs Court.

"Never made a better bargain!" the old rancher declared. "Why that danged kid saved me five thousand in meat and horseflesh, let alone future savings. I paid him $150 wages, some grub and that's all. He said he'd be coming back. Darn him! We played poker an' if he didn't gouge me plenty—plenty!"

JERRY left the Tinn place and headed home. Pete Larsen had been running the ranch at the head of Cowback Basin. Jerry spent the night at his ranch, but drove his buckboard down to Shorthorn the following day. That night he sat in President Grouper's parlor with Sheriff Guerdon and told them where he had been, what he had done—showed them ten pounds troy weight of gold coins which he had to show for his bounty hunting, wages, and gambling with the chief of Capron Hole.

"Blot Tinn is wearing the silver-plated revolver taken the day my father was killed," Jerry said. "He's got one hundred eleven head of C Bar C prime beef over on my grandfather's old homestead. I want the law on him!"

"What good would it do—charging him in Stone Springs?" Sheriff Guerdon asked.

"Don't seem to be much yuh can do, Jerry," the banker said.

"How come he hounded my father all his life?" Jerry demanded.

The two men exchanged glances Then they told Jerry the story. The trouble was that Trim Cope had courted the girl Blot Tinn had claimed. Trim was honorable, kindly, competent. Blot Tinn was a horse thief and scoundrel—a killer. She had scorned him, and the way things were, Blot Tinn hadn't dared to kill Trim or steal the girl. Blot wasn't established, yet. After losing the girl, he had tried to force a fight in town. Trim had knocked him endwise, and taken his silver-mounted revolver.

"Blot Tinn, when he got established in Capron Hole, swore to wipe the Copes off the face of the earth!" Sheriff Guerdon said. "He killed Trim first. Ninna Cope managed a getaway—carried her boy Judson with her. Tinn kept searching—looking for them. No matter how much money he made, how many acres he took title on, how big his herds grew, he kept hunting for Jud Cope.

"Jud's mother died," Sheriff Guerdon continued. "Jud married yore mother, Jerry. Blot Tinn never seemed to catch up with Jud, and Jud kept running. He could have bushwhacked Tinn—but instead he kept out of his way.

"To live, Judson Cope turned gambler. He wasn't much—always kind of a tinhorn, and then he got that stake. He and you bought the old Cowback outfit. That was kind of foolish since yore spread is right up against Capron Hole, practically. Jud was wore out, running away. He told me that when I warned him, Jerry."

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"Was it Blot Tinn who did that killing?" Jerry demanded.

"I don't know, Jerry," Mr. Grouper said. "He may have sent two killers over. He was in Stone Springs that week and swore to kill all the Copes."

"And he said no Cope was going to *live?*" Jerry demanded.

"That's the way of it, Jerry," the sheriff admitted. "Mr. Grouper and I have been inquiring around. We never have known the full story of that Trim Cope affair. Mr. Grouper's banking connections—they found out."

"And I can't take that killer before the grand jury?" Jerry asked.

"That's the way it is," the two men admitted, Mr. Grouper adding, "Of course, Jerry, yuh can't hang on. Yuh'd better go while the going is good. We'll close up the C Bar C outfit. We'll lose some money, but we'll mark it off our books."

"Yuh won't lose a cent, Mr. Grouper!" Jerry declared, and dragged out that horse-hide pocket belt with ten pounds of gold coins. He thrust it at the banker. "That's right off Blot Tinn's range. I've got one hundred eleven head of prime beef over in Capron Hole—they'll settle for that mortgage, Mister! I'm going back to Capron Hole. I'll get them!"

"Yuh figure Tinn's just pasturing those cows for yuh?" the sheriff asked, grinning in spite of the gravity of the matter.

"More'n that!" Jerry exclaimed. "Don't forget Grandpap Trim Cope's Herefords, his homestead, the forty years my gran'-mother, my mother, my dad and I've been on the run. The Copes have quit running!"

The two men shook their heads. That youngster had nerve. He had gone right into Capron Hole and even taken stakes card-playing with the old gambling rancher. He had located the stolen cows. He had found the silver-plated fancy revolver Trim Cope had taken from Blot Tinn, and which old Blot Tinn had hired killers to bring back after forty years!

Nevertheless, they shook hands gravely with the determined, desperate, reckless youth. They wished him good luck.

"We can't do much, but we're pulling for yuh!" the sheriff said, when Jerry Cope had told his intention and his plans.

"I reckon even Blot Tinn in his own bailiwick better look sharp!" the banker said. "Plenty of folks fear and despise him even in his home county."

Jerry took four men up to his outfit and they stacked the alfalfa and wild hay. Jerry caught and shot two rustlers up in the Cowback Pass as they came along with eight head of C Bar C beefs. One, before he died, told Jerry that Blot Tinn's foreman, Pug Circuit, had caught Jud Cope unaware. Tinn had demanded the silver-mounted revolver and Jud went to get it, where it hung on a buckhorn rack in the living room. When he saw the weapon, Blot Tinn shot his victim twice in the back—and bragged what he had done. Tinn, himself, not hired men, did the killing.

"Now I got just one left," Tinn had declared, "I'll knock off the kid, next. Then there won't be no more Copes—no heir of Trim Cope left to mess up my range." Then the rustler had closed his eyes and died.

THE last of the Copes let his whiskers grow. He had some time to kill waiting for the autumn Capron Hole shipping roundup. He experimented with his whiskers to disguise his face and he rode over his pasture, watching his cattle and practicing every day with his snake-gun, a .22 caliber nine-shot revolver. He shot straight; he drew and shot from the hip, elbow and eye-line levels.

At night he played cards with his riders and his cook. On them, in good fun, he practiced his tricks—and paid the boys who discovered how they were done. Time and again he got away with sleight o' hand—and thus he used the skill his father had taught him.

Despite his constant efforts, day working and night practicing, Jerry searched along the base of the great rock cliff where his father had gone to make his cache of spare money, especially the fur take. There was enough money to make sure of paying the note, if he could find it. He had staved off the bank; he had managed to build up his outfit; he had ceased flight from Old Blot Tinn, turning back to challenge the old boy who had sworn to wipe out the last of the Trim Cope breed.

One afternoon late Jerry found three small cobbles laid together in a triangle with a fourth stone on top of them.

"Why—that's a monument!" Jerry exclaimed. The day had waned but he had lots of time. He found a hole beneath

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the stones and in it was the cache of money.

In the morning he rode away from the ranch. His destination was Windfall Timbers. This was the railroad shipping town. To the loading pens old Blot Tinn drove his spring culls. Now, in the autumn he was coming out with his prime beef and feeders. When he arrived in town, broad grins welcomed him. Windfall Timbers had never seen a fancier gambler.

Jerry Cope was dressed in a snow-white nutria hat, a fancy embroidered buckskin shirt, a velvet waistcoat, and elkskin breeches. His boots were custom-built, forty dollars a pair and his spurs were silver dollars cut down. Never had Windfall Timbers welcomed such a gambler. The horse he rode was a Spanish walker, stepping sideways, proud and perky as its rider, showing off. The saddle and pack-saddle of Jerry's horses were double-cinch.

"That feller come clear up the Thief Trail from the Border!" men declared.

Blot Tinn, perhaps the worst dressed man in 40,000 square miles, was met by Jerry when he swung down from his bronc in front of the Last Chance saloon. Tinn glared at the gorgeous attire, sniffed at the pointed mustache and goatee, grinned, showing his big, yellow snags of teeth. The dandy flashed a smile that was white pearl, but sniffy and scornful.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Tinn exclaimed.

"Too bad you are so poor and patched and dirty!" the stranger sighed.

"What!" Tinn gasped.

"I suppose you never had poker stakes—or much?"

Tinn drew out a pocket full of money—a wad big as a fist. He caught the dandy by the arm and dragged him to a table in the saloon, shoved him into a chair, and a famous game began.

Old eyes, but experienced, studied cards, made bets, played to annihilate the impertinent dandy dude. Seven or eight hands later, Old Blot Tinn was full of wrath. He had bet on hands just not quite strong enough for the cards Jerry held. He drew from his cash account at the bank. He was short, but he expected to get cash for his shipping herd. The Windfall Timbers Bank allowed a thousand dollar overdraft. He lost every penny in half an hour.

"A tinhorn game, eh?" the fancy dandy shrugged, as if to turn away. "You have a few cows—perhaps?"

"A few! Sit down, you!" Blot Tinn roared. "Here—here's an IOU for a thousand head!"

"Ah—we play no longer for pleasure—amusement, eh?" the slim young dandy smiled. "You do not look like so much, but you have plenty of money, I see."

"Play!" Tinn ordered. "Shut yore darned mouth!"

Reckless now, angry and insulted, Blot Tinn played. Not only did he watch his thousand head of beef slip across the table. But he lost all of his shippers as well. Now he was stopped. Realization came to him as his big hands rested on the table's edge. Blot Tinn had lost about everything but his boots.

"All right!" he nodded. "I'm through!"

"But— Are those shippers yours to play away? The titles?" the slender, dapper, smiling gambler asked, handling the paper IOUs.

"It could be, perhaps, you have acquired temporarily, cows that were not properly bought—brands belonging not to you," the gambler suggested. "Such things have happened—"

BYSTANDERS drew back. Never had any one suggested to Blot Tinn that he didn't own the cows he claimed—not in years, at any rate. He had even changed the ownership on Trim Cope's brand, the T—C to his own name. Of his many registered brands, the Blot Tinn pride was the T—C. They were prime, small-bone, brown and white Herefords.

Now a man who had just won all of Tinn's spare cash, a thousand head of beef and his shipping herd, was asking if Tinn owned what he had gambled away.

"What the blazes do you mean, stranger?" Tinn demanded, wrathfully.

"I mean these T Bar C and C Bar C cows you've claimed for yore own," the man said. "Are they yores to sell and now to pay a debt of honor with?"

Blot Tinn backed up, knocking his chair over behind him. He blinked his bleary eyes, knuckled them, stared at that dapper expert who had tricked and taken him.

Under that hot, red-eyed scrutiny, the gambler changed his bearing. He stood not as the dapper gambler but solidly

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and in his own normal easy stance. For the first time, the old rancher saw clearly the face of his antagonist who had nagged him into reckless extravagance.

"Why—who the hell are yuh? Why, blast it, yuh're the trapper!" Tinn's voice rose into shrill thinness. "Who are yuh?"

"I'm Trim Cope's grandson, Judson Cope's son—I'm Jerry Cope!" came the answer. "I've come back after the Cope cows and lands! And I've got our cows, Blot Tinn. And yuh've cheated, playing off with beef yuh don't own. Yuh've got one hundred eleven of my cows yuh rustled from me—and yuh're shipping eleven hundred head from Grandpap's Hereford herd!"

Blot Tinn staggered back, stunned. On his hip was that silver gun. He hesitated to draw it. In that moment he realized that the son of the man he had murdered knew that weapon—had in it the proof of murder.

"Jerry Cope!" Blot Tinn whispered, blinking.

Now the kid he despised faced him. Tinn glared, blinked, looked for the gambling youngster's gun. No holster was in sight. Perhaps the fool didn't pack a revolver? Anyhow his hands were empty—except the wad of paper IOUs in his left hand.

Old Blot Tinn grabbed for the silver pistol. His palm closed on the hammer, instead of the pearl grips. He yanked, was forced to shift his hand. Out from under Jerry Cope's left shoulder came a dark, clean weapon. It pointed and smoked.

Tinn's head jerked up. The big fancy gun in his fist jumped, the bullet smashing into Jerry's left shoulder.

Slumping against the wall, Jerry Cope pulled his trigger three times, fast! Blot Tinn dropped to his knees, sat on his heels, bent his face to the floor, and then convulsively sprawled out, squirming and jerking for a moment. In the tomblike silence of the room, they heard him say, "I'm coming, Ninna." Blot Tinn died as he lived, in violence.

Jerry Cope, blood-stained and weak stood up straight, swaying slightly.

"I'm claiming that thief's outfit!" he said. "Anybody claiming any different?"

There was no dissenting sound in the barroom.

Cowpuncher Lon McAlester returns to his home range after a term in jail, and finds the biggest fight of his life on his hands when a grim sheep-cattle war rages in—

THE HARD TRAIL

A Novelet of the Comeback Road

By ROLLAND LYNCH

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Horses and men moved, undaunted, under the huge menace of the flames

Does the fierce test of fire melt the hates of men—or temper them to greater hardness?

Crossed Trails

By A. LESLIE

A BEETLING battlement of jagged cliffs, the Parate Hills rose from the plains of west Texas. North by south for miles marched the towering wall that shut in the rich rangeland to the west. Few and far between were the passes across the great natural barrier. Foremost was Espada Gulch, through which ran the Ladron Trail, so named because it had once been the preferred route of outlaw bands raiding the rich ranch country west of the hills.

Dawn was breaking over the hills. The sky was scarlet and gold and primrose

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and amethyst. The hill crests were ringed about with saffron flame. Their mighty shoulders were swathed in mantles of royal purple that deepened to sable where the denser shadows flowed about their feet. Espada—Sword-cut—Gulch was brimful of mist that hung like a curtain of black-streaked ash. From out the mist, a ribbon of tarnished silver, flowed the trail to tumble steeply down the broken escarpment till it reached the level rangeland and followed the gentle undulations of the prairie and vanished into the west.

A couple of hundred yards west of the foot of the leveling slope, screened by the bristle of a thicket, stood old John Masters, owner of the big J Four spread, gnarled hand resting on his gun butt. Beside him stood his foreman, Cal Hansen. Behind crowded a full dozen of the J Four cowboys.

Masters was a lanky old man with grizzled hair. He had a fighter's face, but it was also a good-tempered face with kindly blue eyes. The corners of his mouth quirked upward beneath his drooping mustache. Hansen also had a fighter's face, but anything but a good-tempered one. His mouth was a thin gash, his dark eyes were truculent. He was a blocky giant of a man with abnormally long arms to the thick wrists of which were attached huge, hairy hands. He looked to be a hard man. And he was.

THE eyes of all were fixed on the shadowy, mist-choked mouth of the pass. As the sun rose behind the hills, light flowed over their crests like water, sweeping away the shadows that clothed the western slopes. But the pass, behind its veil of mist, remained dark and impenetrable.

"Ought to be along any minute now," muttered old John. "They camped on that flat space just beyond the east mouth of the pass last night, and they start movin' early."

"We'll fix 'em!" growled Hansen. "No blankety-blank-blank nesters is goin' to squat on our open range."

"They claim to have got title from the state to that land south of Brujo Gorge," Masters remarked with apparent irrelevance.

"They're always claimin' somethin'," returned Hansen, vindictively. "They ain't got no right here—that section has been open range ever since there's been a Texas. It's up to us to keep it open."

"Right," agreed Masters. "Let 'em get started in, and it's the finish of the cow business. We got to stop it now."

The upper edge of the sun peeped over the cliffs. The rangeland burned gold and amethyst spangled with sparkling gems of dew. The hill slopes pulsed with a myriad shades of green. Only the mouth of the pass remained dark and mysterious behind its curtain of mist. And at the top the mist was thinning somewhat.

Suddenly a brilliant star of flashing light burst through the gray veil. It rolled forward, followed by another and another. The moving objects took shape, resolved into huge wains each drawn by six horses. Covered wagons! The ships of the prairie, the vanguard of empire marching westward!

The sunlight shimmered on the white canvas, glinted on the metal of the horses' harness. Lurching, swaying, they rumbled down the steep trail. Masters and his men had counted thirty of the ponderous vehicles when the last star of light burst through the thinning mist.

"Get set!" cautioned the ranch owner. "Spread out a mite—don't get caught bunched. Everybody step from the brush at the same time. Let me do the talkin', and follow my lead. Don't make no move unless I make one. We don't hanker for trouble, and I figger we can get by without it."

"I figger it'd be better to make a example of this bunch," rumbled Hansen. "Send 'em back the way they come with a few punctured hides and others will be sort of slow to come this way."

"Shut up, Cal," said Masters. "I'm runnin' this show. If there's to be a ruckus, let 'em make the first move. Then we'll have a talkin' point when Chan Austin shows up to find out what's goin' on."

"Dang that kid sheriff!" spat Hansen. "He's always snoopin' around, stickin' his nose into somethin' what don't concern him. I'm about fed up with that jigger. Time'll come when I'll—"

"Take my advice, and yuh'll lay off Chan," Masters interrupted. "He's a cold proposition, even if he is sort of young. Yuh might bite off more'n yuh could chaw."

"I'll do the chawin,' when it comes to a showdown," rumbled Hansen.

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"Enough palaverin'," said Masters. "Shut up, now, and get set. They're almost to the bottom of the slope."

Forward rolled the great wains. The leading wagon was opposite the thicket when the J Four outfit stepped into view. Masters had a gun in his hand. His men stood with thumbs hooked over their cartridge belts, watchful eyes sweeping the length of the wagon train.

"Pull up!" shouted Masters, menacing the driver of the leading wagon with his Colt. "This'll be far enough."

The driver jerked back sharply on his reins. The wagon jolted to a stop. Those behind followed suit, until the train stood motionless.

"Now turn that shebang around and head back the way yuh come," Masters ordered. "Yuh ain't wanted here."

There was a swishing, slatting sound. The canvas side of the lead wagon dropped to the ground, revealing twenty men standing three deep in a harrow formation. The butts of leveled rifles were clamped against their shoulders. Their eyes glinted back of the sights.

UNDER the threat of those twenty black muzzles, the astounded J Four punchers froze. Masters stood rigid, gun in hand, staring incredulously at the ready riflemen.

A tall old man at the end of the first line spoke, in a peculiarly deep and resonant voice.

"Better put that pistol back where you took it from, Brother," he said. "We expected somethin' like this and made ready. If you ain't lookin' for real big trouble, you won't start anythin'. We fellers are peaceful men, but we don't aim to be buffaloed by no cattle raisers."

He turned and shouted an order. Instantly the second wagoneer started his horses and swerved them around the lead vehicle. One by one, the train rumbled past.

Fuming with helpless rage, Masters and his hands watched them go.

"Yuh figger yuh can get by with it?" Masters said thickly to the tall leader of the farmers.

"I figger we're gettin' by with it," the other returned imperturbably as the last wagon lurched past. He eyed Masters speculatively, shifted his gaze to the bristle of thicket.

"Brother, you don't look like a feller who would shoot a man in the back from the brush," he said, "but we're takin' no chances. March out on the road, now, and walk ahead of this wagon."

Helpless under the menace of the ready rifles, the raging cowboys obeyed. Masters' mouth set in a straight line. Cal Hansen's beefy face was black with wrath. Ten of the farmers dropped from the wagon bed and marched behind them. The crestfallen procession of ranchers scuffed its spur-jingling, high-heeled boots through the dust of the trail under the muzzles of the rifles. For nearly half a mile the old farmer kept them limping along. Then he called a halt.

"I reckon this will be far enough, Brother," he told Masters. "Now you can go back to where you have your horses hidden. But don't get any notions in your head. These rifles of ourn outrange your pistols considerable. Us fellers are from Kentucky and we know how to shoot. So be careful. By the way, what's your name?"

Masters hesitated, then supplied it in surly tones. The old man nodded.

"Glad to know you, Masters," he said. "Maybe we'll get to understand each other better some day and get along together. My name's Bixby—Ezra Bixby."

"Glad to know you, too, Bixby," Masters replied, not to be outdone in politeness by the other. "Uh-huh, mebbe we'll get to know each other better—*mebbe!*"

The emphasis old John put on the last word intimated much that was left unsaid. But the farmer only nodded. He and his men ranged themselves across the trail. They stayed there until the J Four bunch was beyond easy six-gun range. Then they climbed back into their wagon, which rumbled on after the train.

Cal Hansen shook his fist and shouted curses.

"Shut up," Masters told him. "We got outsmarted, that's all, and blabbin' won't help matters. They took this trick, but there'll be another time comin'. We'll have our turn."

With sore feet and sorer dispositions, the J Fours at last reached their horses, tethered in the thicket, and thankfully forked them. Muttering and growling, they rode west along the trail. The wagons had long since passed out of sight. Topping a rise, however, they saw a single horseman speeding toward them. Old John raised himself in his stirrups.

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"Looks like Chan Austin's sorrel," he remarked.

Cal Hansen also took a look. "Uh-huh," he grunted. "it's that doggone sheriff. Figgered he'd be along. Reckon he met them wagons and got the yarn from them. All set to crow over us."

"Chan ain't the crowin' sort," Masters differed, "but I reckon he'll have somethin' to say. You keep still now, Cal, and let me do any talkin'. that's to be done."

The tall sorrel swiftly drew near, speedily justifying Masters' guess as to its identity and that of its rider.

CHANNING AUSTIN, sheriff of the county, was a tall and broad-shouldered young man several years younger than Cal Hansen, who had just turned thirty. He had a firm mouth and steady gray eyes. His hair was black, his nose was straight and he was more than passingly good looking. There was a twinkle of amusement in the gray eyes as he drew rein beside Masters.

"Looks like the luck sort of went a bit wrong, eh, Uncle John?" he observed.

Cal Hansen gritted his teeth. Masters met the sheriff's gaze unconcernedly. "Uh-huh," he admitted, "it did."

"I'm glad things turned out like they did," said Sheriff Austin. "I was tryin' to get here before trouble started, but I reckon I'd have been too late if anythin' had really busted loose."

"Yeah, I reckon yuh would," Masters returned drily. "Fact is, I don't see why yuh have any call to horn into this business. Don't figger to side with the nesters, do yuh?"

"I'm not siding with anybody," Austin returned. "I'm sheriff of the county."

"Cowmen elected yuh," Masters remarked, with meaning.

"Yes," Austin returned evenly, "but not as cowmen. They elected me as American citizens of the county. I'm sworn to uphold the law, without fear or favor, doing justice to all."

Hansen's thick lips writhed in a sneer, but old John tugged at his mustache and looked a trifle uncertain. Evidently he decided to pass over this phase of the matter.

"Them blasted nesters ain't got no business in this section," he declared.

"I looked up the records," Austin replied. "They're not nesters, Uncle John. They've got title to the land south of Brujo Gorge, got it from the State and paid for it."

"They didn't have no right to get it!" Masters barked wrathfully. "Them blankety-blank politicians over to the capital! This has always been open range, and you know it. If I'd figgered on anythin' like this happenin', I'd have got title to that section myself."

"Yuh should have thought of that earlier," Austin replied.

That one was hard to answer. Masters didn't try. "The hand ain't played out, yet," he declared. "They took this trick, but I've got a trump or two up my sleeve yet."

Sheriff Austin understood perfectly. "Takin' the law into your own hands is dangerous business, Uncle John," he said. "These farmers are American citizens, with the rights of American citizens, and must be treated as such."

Again old John looked uncertain for a moment. "When the law and plain ord'nary justice are on opposite sides of the fence, I figger the law is pullin' sort of contrariwise," he remarked at length.

"Depends pretty much on how a feller figgers what's justice," Austin replied.

Masters tugged his mustache, rumbled in his throat. "Aw, heck," he exclaimed at length, "all this gabbin' don't get us nowhere. Come on, boys, we got work to do. We'll finish up this business when the right time comes."

He touched up his horse and rode slantwise across the prairie, his hands thundering behind him. Cal Hansen turned and cast a derisive glance at the tall young sheriff sitting his horse at the edge of the trail.

Masters and his riders did not draw rein until they reached the J Four ranchhouse, which sat on a slight rise at the southwest corner of his range. The house was commodious and well built, as were the barns, storehouses, bunk house and other buildings.

On three sides the site of the buildings was hemmed in by dense chaparral which Masters had refrained from removing since it provided an effectual and welcome wind break. To the north the belt of chaparral was comparatively thin. Beyond was a strip of grassland which ran for perhaps a quarter of a mile until the thick growth began again and rolled for miles north.

To the west the growth extended to the western hills. On the east was the

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open grassland. To the south of the ranchhouse the growth ran to the lip of the deep and narrow canyon known as Brujo Gorge.

The canyon, an unpassable gulf, ran for many miles to the west, finally losing itself in the hills. To the east, however, it petered out after a couple of miles.

Something less than a mile to the west of the ranchhouse, the gorge was spanned by a single narrow and rickety bridge sometimes used by the J Four cowboys as a short-cut to town, though they usually took the somewhat longer route around the eastern terminus of the canyon. The bridge opened onto what had formerly been open range, but was now the holdings of the newly arrived farmers.

LIKE most old-time cattlemen, John Masters hated farmers. He firmly believed that their advent in a section meant the beginning of the end for the cow business.

"Give 'em a inch, and they'll take a darn sight more'n a mile—they'll take over the whole section," he was wont to declare.

Masters believed his title to his holdings was good, but in common with many Southwest-Texas ranchers, he was not quite sure. He did not relish a court test. Should grangers take a notion to nest on his land, he was a little uncertain as to what the outcome might be, if he depended on the law and did not handle the situation himself.

Word that farmers had secured title to the open range to the south of the gorge and were preparing to move in disturbed him greatly and precipitated ill-advised action on the part of the old rancher. The result was not calculated to improve Masters' temper or lessen his grudge against the farmers.

The impetuous Hansen was for immediate action. "We'll wait until they make camp tonight and then we'll ride down there and gun 'em," he suggested.

"Uh-huh, and mebbe take another shellackin'," Masters replied. "Them hellions are fighters, even if they are nesters. Rec'lect, my Dad was brought up in Kentucky and I know what they can do with them long guns of theirs. Knockin' a patch of hide off a squirrel's head at a hundred yards ain't no stunt for a Kentuckian. This thing will take some thinkin' out, so you lay off, Cal. Yuh were sure plumb behind the door when they handed out brains."

Hansen subsided, with sundry growls and mutters, but just the same he had his own notions. About two weeks later, when he and a number of the J Four hands rode to town, he proceeded to put them into effect.

Sheriff Channing Austin was in his office when one of his two deputies hurried in, the other being out of town on a chore at the time.

"There's a bunch of them farmer fellers down to the general store layin' in supplies," the deputy exclaimed. "Cal Hansen and his bunch are layin' for 'em. There's liable to be trouble, Chan."

Sheriff Austin stood up. He buckled his gun to his lean waist. "Let's go," he said quietly.

When, a few minutes later, he rounded a corner and the general store, before which there was a wide open space, came into view, he realized that the deputy had not exaggerated. Standing in front of the store were half a dozen of the grangers. They had their rifles with them, but were discreetly keeping the butts on the ground, and not without reason. Standing perhaps a score of yards distant and facing the farmers, was Cal Hansen, a menacing Colt in his hand. His punchers were spread out in back of him and ready for action.

"You blankety-blanks ain't buyin' no goods in this pueblo," Hansen was shouting. "Get the hell outa here if yuh don't want to eat lead."

The farmers were hesitating. They were caught settin'. They knew they wouldn't have a chance, at that distance, against Hansen and his cowboys. But before they could make a move one way or the other, Sheriff Austin reached the scene.

"Stand back," he told his deputy in low tones. "I'll handle this."

With that, he walked forward and squarely between the grouped farmers and the J Four cowboys.

Cal Hansen saw him coming. "You keep out of this, Austin," he bawled. "Yuh ain't got no call to stick your nose into it."

Chan Austin did not reply. He swerved, and walked steadily toward the J Four foreman.

"Keep back, I tell yuh!" bellowed Hansen, waving his six. "You take another step and I'll plug yuh." Austin

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said nothing, and continued to walk. He was within ten paces of Hansen.

Hansen shifted his gun nervously. He shot a sideways glance at his men, who were standing rigid. "Don't come no closer," he shouted. "I'm warnin' yuh for the last time."

SHERIFF AUSTIN covered the ten paces in five long strides. Hansen involuntarily took a step backward. Still without speaking, Austin walked straight up to Hansen, yanked his gun away from him with his left hand, slapped Hansen's face with his right, then jerked Hansen's second gun from his belt. He threw both guns into the street and gripped Hansen by the scruff of the neck. For the first time he spoke.

"You fellers be out of town before I get back from the calaboose," he told the J Four riders. With that he marched the cursing Hansen to jail and locked him up.

"The plumb nerviest thing I ever saw in my life," the puncher who later related the happening to John Masters declared. "There's somethin' about that feller that sort of shrivels your insides. He had Cal buffaloed the minute he started across the square."

"None of the rest of yuh reached?" Masters asked curiously.

The cowboy scratched his head. "Fact is," he admitted, "I reckon we was all so plumb interested in what was goin' to happen to Cal, we just nacherly forgot we was wearin' guns!"

"I've a notion it's a mighty good thing for you that yuh did," old John commented drily.

Masters swore over the mishap of his foreman, but more than once he chuckled under his mustache as he rode to town to bail Cal out.

"I warned yuh to say lay off," he told Hanson, after he paid the foreman's fine and got him released. "Austin won't stand for anythin' like yuh tried to pull. And yuh know damn well if yuh'd made a move to pull trigger on him, even if yuh did have your iron in your hand, he would have drawed and killed yuh. Yuh've seen him shoot it out before now. What we've got to do is outsmart him. I'm figgerin' somethin' right now."

But as the days and weeks passed, Masters made no move to put his plan, whatever it was, into effect.

"Those hellions are here to stay, all right," one of his hands, who kept tabs on the doings of the farmers, reported. "They've built cabins, strung fence, and, would yuh b'lieve it, they're buildin' a church!"

"Also," observed Masters, "they've planted winter wheat. I happen to know they set a heap of store by that plantin' of wheat. I've investigated and learned they're almighty short on dinero. They count heavy on that wheat crop to give 'em enough money to keep goin' on.

"We'll just hole up a big herd of cows in the east mouth of Brujo Canyon, where there ain't nothin' for 'em to eat, and keep 'em good and hungry. Then come a dark night, we'll cut the nesters' fence and shove the cows in on the wheat. I know the lay of their fields and it'll be a cinch.

"Before come mornin' the cows will have grazed over the wheat and tromped down what they don't eat. That'll fix the darn nesters. Starve 'em out, that's the notion. They'll have to pull up stakes and trail. It'll be a cinch." He chuckled under his mustache at the thought.

AND doubtless the gods of the hills and the rangeland, who, after all, are just gods, also chuckled, and decided to take a hand.

For quite a spell it had not rained a drop. The drought was not serious enough to cause apprehension, but the grass, belly-high on a horse, was brown and dry. Also, tinder-dry was the dense growth of chaparral that fringed the grass land. On the morning after his conversation with his "spy," Masters noted a peculiar haze mantling the northern sky line.

While he and several of his hands were speculating as to its nature, a line-riding cowboy raced a lathered horse up to the ranchhouse.

"Fire!" he shouted to Masters. "She's burnin' to beat hell up to the north, and headed this way. The cows are drifting before it, and the boys up there are shovin' 'em along fast as they can."

"Shove 'em to the east and through Espada Gulch," Masters ordered instantly.

"Can't," the cowboy as instantly replied. "We thought of that, but the fire's already over to the east, eatin' down through the chaparral belt at the foot of the hills. It'll be out on the grass long before we could make the notch."

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Masters stared at the darkening northern sky. "There ain't a chance to run 'em south beyond the grassland," he muttered. "Once it gets goin' in the grass, it'll travel faster'n a horse can gallop, with this wind blowin' outa the north like it is.

"Get the rigs on your cayuses, boys," he told his hands. "Ride up to meet the herd and shove it down here in the bend as quick as yuh can. Then we'll try to figger somethin'."

Less than an hour later the great herd of cows, many of them scorched and blackened, bawl-bellered into the bend and were held south and east of the ranchhouse.

"Come on, we'll ride up to the grass belt north of the brush and see what we can do," Masters told his cursing, sweating hands.

They found there was little they could do. They tried several times to light backfires, but the results were abortive and even close to disastrous. The fires refused to burn against the strong wind, and one or two were extinguished with difficulty as they threatened to roll back into the chaparral belt to the south.

Smoke was billowing up the northern sky in clouds now. The sun shone through the haze like a baleful red eye. Already the whiff of burning vegetation reached the watchers, on the wings of the wind that blew steadily from the north.

A horseman came riding out of the west. It was Sheriff Channing Austin, who had taken a short cut across the bridge that spanned Brujo Canyon.

"Looks like yuh're in for trouble, Uncle John," he shouted as he drew rein.

"Uh-huh, it sure does," Masters admitted. "Reckon we stand to lose the ranchhouse and other buildin's, and the herd. Nothin' we can do to stop it. If we could only clear this belt of grass, but we can't. Can't do a thing with a backfire against this wind."

Austin nodded, staring at the broad belt of grass. He glanced at the smoke-filled northern sky, turned his gaze westward for a moment. Suddenly his eyes glowed and he shouted aloud.

"Hold on here, Uncle John," he exclaimed. "I figger mebbe I know a way to stop it. I'll be right back."

He whirled his horse and raced westward, vanishing into the growth as he veered south.

"What the heck can he do, I'd like to know!" sneered Cal Hansen. "Him stop it! What can he do?"

"Nothin', I'm scairt," Masters agreed heavily. "Nope, there ain't nothin' to be done. We stand to be cleaned out, that's all. We can get in the clear with our horses, across the bridge over the canyon, but that's all."

"Why not shove the herd across the bridge!" exclaimed Hansen.

"Don't talk loco, Cal," Masters replied. "Yuh know that bridge wouldn't hold up with a string of beefs on it. It would be at the bottom of the canyon before they got half way over. Besides," he added bitterly, "them infernal nesters would never let the cows cross onto their land. They wouldn't hardly stop men crossin' to keep from gettin' burned up, I reckon, but it would be different with the cows."

Meanwhile, Chan Austin had flashed across the bridge and pulled up before the grouped farmers, who were watching the smoke clouds roll up the sky.

"Lucky us fellers has got that crack in the ground between us and the fire," said old Ezra Bixby, the leader of the farmers, nodding a greeting to the sheriff.

"Uh-huh, almighty lucky," Austin agreed. "John Masters isn't so lucky."

"The sinful ain't always lucky," Bixby observed grimly.

Austin unforked and walked over to the old farmer. "Bixby," he said, "you fellers can save Masters' buildings and herd, if yuh will. Here's how yuh do it."

As he outlined his plan, Bixby's face hardened.

"Why should we give comfort to our enemies?" he demanded. "Besides, what happens to them cowmen is no concern of ourn."

CHANNING AUSTIN looked him straight in the eye. "Uncle Ezra," he said, "I don't know much about religion and such things. Ain't never been to church much, ain't never thought much about it one way or the other. But you fellers set up to be churchmen. Yuh go to meetin' twice a week, and pray to God Almighty to forgive your sins.

"Now, as I rec'lect it, there's considerable in the Book dealin' with forgivin' other folks the bad things they do to yuh, about returnin' good for evil. And way back in the beginnin' of the Book there's

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somethin' told about a feller who once asked, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' I seem to recollect that he got a pretty straight answer, too. Remember it?"

Old Ezra Bixby stared at the young sheriff.

He stroked his grizzled beard.

"Son," he said, "I never figgered the day would come when it would take a boy to show me my duty, but I reckon that day's got here, all right." He whirled to the listening farmers. "Move!" his great voice rang out. "Hitch to them 'shares. We got a chore to do, and there ain't a minute to waste."

Ten minutes later, teams of horses were pounding across the swaying bridge, each team dragging a clanking, bumping object.

The whole sky was filled with smoke now as the dense clouds rolled south. To the north the sable billows were flecked and streaked with incipient lightnings—sparks and whirling brands tossed aloft on the wings of the wind.

"She's comin' fast," muttered John Masters. "We'll have to be movin' soon."

"Hey," Cal Hansen suddenly shouted, "what's all them horses headin' this way over west? There must be twenty-five or thirty teams. What in blazes!"

Old John peered through the smoke mists, he blinked his eyes, as if his sight deceived him. He let out an amazed whoop.

"It's the nesters!" he yelled. "Them teams are hitched to plows. They're plowin' furrows across the grass belt. Now what the blazes do yuh know about that!"

Riding ahead of the tramping plowmen with Ezra Bixby, Chan Austin glanced at the smoke-filled sky, peered forward, turned in his saddle to scan the advancing teams.

He shook his head.

"We've got to keep 'em in line better, Uncle Ezra," he exclaimed. "Some are walkin' faster and gettin' in front of the others. That'll make the furrows ragged and leave grass patches. That fire will jump like a livin' thing if it gets half the chance. We got to keep 'em in line."

Old Ezra glanced back. "I'll keep 'em in line," he declared, and swelled his lungs.

An instant later his great bass voice pealed forth in the words of a grand old marching hymn—

Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war,
With the Cross of Jesus
Going on before!

Chan Austin's breath caught in his throat. Glancing back again, he saw the line of hissing plowshares straighten out as the plowmen understood and one after another joined in the song until a mighty chorus was thundering through the smoke-filled air—

Christ the Royal Master
Leads against the foe;
Forward into battle,
See, His banners go!

The hiss of the plowshares, the jingle of harness and the steady pounding of the horses' hoofs formed a booming organ accompaniment to the roaring chant—

At the sign of triumph
Satan's host doth flee;
On then, Christian soldiers,
On to victory!

AUSTIN cut across ahead of the marching plowmen, raced his horse over the wide grass land, and pulled up beside John Masters.

"We figger to cut three swaths, Uncle John, curvin' around from the canyon," he said. "We've got thirty plows in line. That'll give us ninety furrows. I figger that'll be enough. As soon as we finish the second swath, comin' back, and start on the third, you and the boys hightail across and start backfires. That had ought to do it. We'll cut a line over to the east, too, headed south, after we finish here. With nothin' but grass over there, and without the wind back of the fire, I figger that will be enough to take care of matters."

Without waiting for the rancher to reply, he whirled his horse and raced to join the chanting plowmen, who were now far to the east.

Well beyond the immediate environs of the ranch buildings, the line of plows turned and came pounding west again. As they rolled past, the plowmen still singing, Old John Masters, his face white and strained, shook his grizzled head.

"They're takin' one awful chance if they plow that third swath," he muttered. "If the fire sweeps down and jumps over east and catches 'em out there, mebbe they'll make it to the bridge and get across, and again mebbe they

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won't. Look, they've turned and are comin' back."

"And Chan Austin out there takin' his chances with 'em, too!" rumbled Cal Hansen. "He used to be a cowhand, before he got to be sheriff. It ain't right for a feller like him to be facin' it alone. So long, Boss!"

His horse shot forward, cutting across the wide belt of grass and the plowed furrows, and dimmed in the thickening smoke.

Chan Austin grinned, with perfect understanding, as Cal Hansen's bay ranged alongside his sorrel, and Hansen grinned back.

The smoke was stifling now, and blistering hot. Sparks and burning brands whirled down to sting and scorch horses and men. The north was an inferno, with its billowing, advancing clouds of blackness and its swords and lances of flame. Like to Lucifer's legions bursting from the mouth of Hell!

But the chanting plowmen marched on with unbroken step.

High above the turmoil there pealed old Ezra Bixby's thundering bass in the inspired words of the second stanza of the hymn—

Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God!
Brothers, we are treading
Where the saints have trod!
We are not divided,
All one body we,
One in hope and doctrine,
One in charity!

Chan Austin's pulses thrilled. His heart beat faster. He forgot smoke and flame and deadly danger in the exhilaration of the intrepid chant. So, he thought, must have sung Saint Michael, the Captain of God's Armies, as he led his triumphant cohorts against the Powers of Darkness.

He glanced at the lines of stern, bearded faces behind the lurching handles of the plows. Nothing could halt the steady advance of those lean soldiers of the sod. So had their fathers and forefathers, long rifles on their shoulders, marched to give battle to the forces of oppression, so that a free land might remain free for free men.

Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war,
With the Cross of Jesus
Going on before!

CHAN AUSTIN realized that he was seeing here, in miniature, the very saga of the West, the undaunted advance, the unswerving conquest of the dumb, terrible imponderable forces of Nature. On pounded the snorting, shivering horses. On hissed the plowshares, the dark loam streaming from their shining surfaces to build a barrier against which the billowing fire fiend would rage in vain. On tramped the scorched and blackened plowmen in time with the triumphant chant that quivered the fire-streaked air. And farther behind, sweating, cursing cowboys lit their backfires, while others stamped out the few brands and sparks that whirled across the wide expanse of new-turned earth.

With the fire roaring toward them scant hundreds of yards away, its fiery breath sapping their strength and rendering the terror-stricken horses well nigh unmanageable, the plowmen completed their third swath and turned sharply south. The going was much easier here, for they were headed away from the main fire to the north, while the flames to the east were slowed by the wind that blew across the line of advance. An hour later, all were gathered safely in the yard of the saved ranchhouse, washing their blackened and blistered faces and consuming vast quantities of cool water.

Old John Masters strode across to where Ezra Bixby stood talking with Chan Austin.

"Bixby," he said, "I'm here to eat crow. I was a damned selfish old fool, and the only thing I can say is, I'm sorry!"

Ezra Bixby held out gnarled fingers and the two old men shook hands, smiling into each other's eyes. Bixby spoke, perhaps unwittingly in the words voiced by a great general that historic day at Appomattox Courthouse when the nation, divided by the horrors of war for four long years, was again united, once and for all time—

"Let us have peace!"

COMING NEXT ISSUE

CASE OF THE PRAYING CORPSE

A True Murder Story of the Old Southwest

by LUTHER LOCKE

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When ambushing outlaws go on a rampage, Arizona Ranger Navajo Tom Raine rides into fast action—and wakes up the town of Wagon Gap with the hot music of a pair of roaring six-guns!

"Elevate you three!" Raine's voice was like the crack of a snapping whip

TAKE A REST,

CHAPTER I

Bushwhack Trap

THE package was lying squarely in the middle of the road, neatly wrapped, tied with stout white twine. There was a piece of buckskin string dangling from the tied twine, too. "Navajo Tom" Raine, Arizona Territorial Ranger, grinned as he halted the magnificent blue roan gelding he called Wampum.

"Some hombre tied that package behind his saddle, up yonder at Wagon Gap, and lit out for home," Raine figured. "But the saddle string broke, and the package—"

The roar of a rifle broke off Raine's thoughts, and a slug popped through the crown of his Stetson. He dived from the saddle into brush along the road, more angry than frightened.

"Neat trick, Mr. Bushwhacker!" Raine muttered, glancing at the package there in the road.

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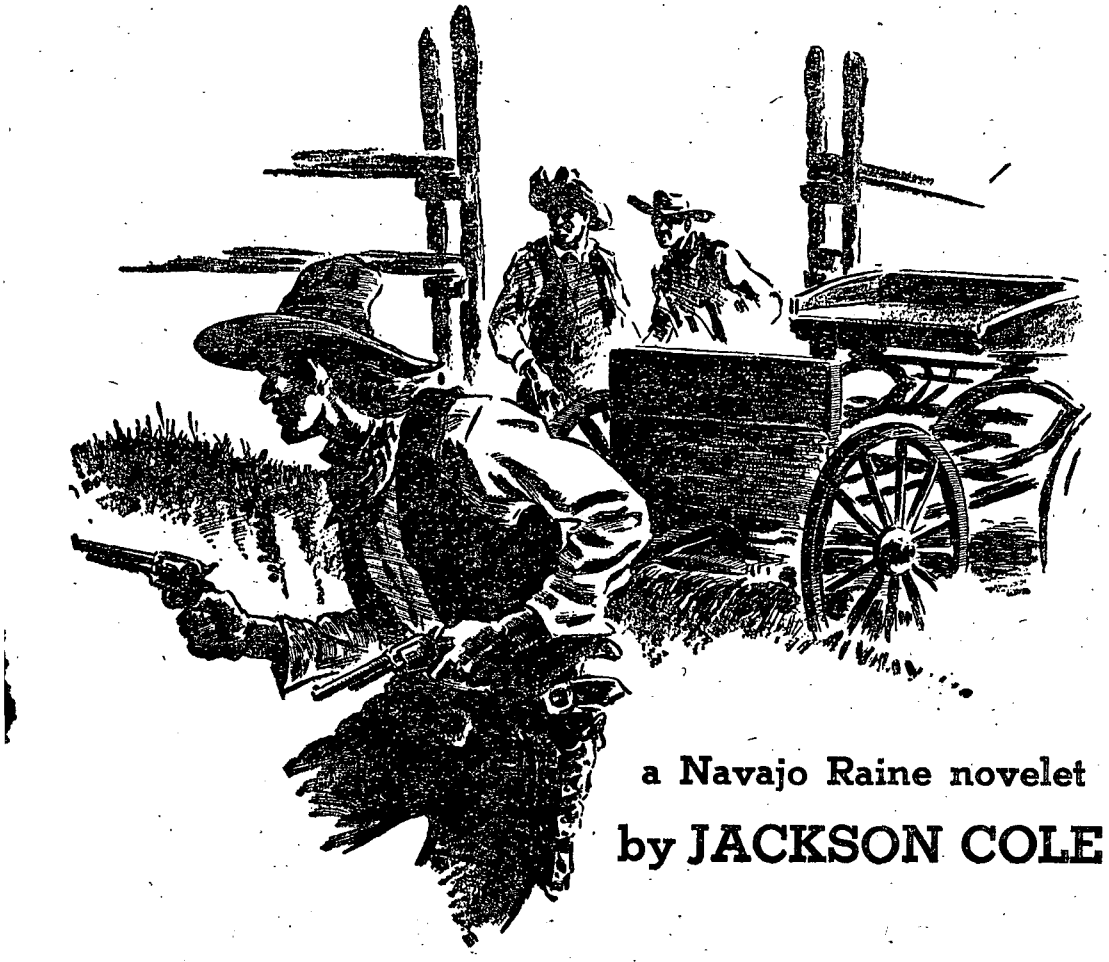

a Navajo Raine novelet

by JACKSON COLE

RANGER!

Raine took the black Stetson off his head, looked soberly at the two holes in the crown for a moment, then put the hat back on.

That slug had come mighty close to braining him, and the Ranger sat motionless there in the brush, sinewy hands fondling the butts of twin six-shooters that had grips made of flawless turquoise. With those Navajo Indian trappings, hawkish features turned mahogany-dark from desert sun, and heavy black hair that was cropped off just short enough to keep the ends from brushing the flat tops of his big shoulders, Raine looked like a stalwart young Indian buck.

But the eyes in that grave, brown face would have told anyone that the Ranger was no Indian, for those eyes were as green as rain-washed sage. And at the moment those sharp eyes had splinters of light in their green depths that spelled bad trouble for the bushwhacker who had set this clever trap.

Wampum had plunged down the road

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a few yards, and was standing there over spilled reins. But as the minutes dragged on and nothing happened, Raine realized that the bushwhacker who had tried to brain him with a slug was a little too clever, or too cowardly, to come snooping around.

Raine got up, walked over to the package in the road that had come close to being his undoing. He picked the package up, and yanked away string and wrapping paper. It was a glazed white shoe box, with only a few folds of thin tissue paper in it.

Raine tossed the box aside, then walked to his horse and mounted. He was puzzled over how the bushwhacker had been able to see him, for the thickets were dense here, and taller than his head, even after he was in Wampum's saddle.

The Ranger's green eyes glinted suddenly as he took note of a towering cottonwood within a hundred yards of the spot where he had been sitting his horse.

"The hole where the bullet went in, on the right side of my hat crown, is up higher than the one the slug made coming out, on the left side," Raine summed it up aloud. "Mr. Bushwhacker was perched up in that cottonwood yonder, most likely."

Raine got off his horse, and went through the thickets on foot. Sweat ran down his face in streams, and his clothing stuck to his skin in wet folds, for it was hot here in the dense brush. But Raine grinned in a mirthless way when he finally stood beneath the huge cottonwood.

A horse had been tied there, and had kicked and stomped at flies, tearing up the sandy earth.

"Mr. Bushwhacker come in from the ridges off yonder," Raine mused aloud. "He tied his hoss, then crawled through the thickets like I did, and planted that box in the road. Then he came back, stood up in the saddle, tossed his catch rope over that branch up there, and hoisted himself up. How in thunder he ever missed me is more— Well, dog-gone!"

Raine's voice ended on an exultant cry. He bent over, snatched up a spur that had been tromped into the loose sand near the bole of the tree. The strap was broken where the buckle had worn it thin, about the way it would have happened if a man came shinnying down that tree in a rush, and got his spur hung in the bark. There was a name engraved on the flat shank of the spur, but it was so criss-crossed with scratches that it was seconds before Raine could read the engraving.

"Sam Bedford!" he cried finally.

There was a startled look in Raine's eyes. Sam Bedford was the sheriff, up yonder at Wagon Gap. Raine had never met Bedford, but had heard a lot about him, for Sam Bedford and Burt Mossman, organizer and Captain of the outlaw-smashing Arizona Territorial Rangers, were close friends!

CHAPTER II

Tough Sheriff

NAVAJO TOM RAINE rode into Wagon Gap an hour after the attempt on his life, green eyes wary as he studied the people along the boardwalks. The Ranger jogged along until he spotted a squat stone building that ran deep in the lot it stood on. There were thick iron bars over the tiny windows towards the back of the building, and a faded sign over the front door said SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

Raine dismounted before the building, aware that people along the street were watching him curiously as he trailed Wampum's reins. He stepped across the boardwalk and went up three steps to the doorway of the sheriff's office, halting on the threshold.

The office was cluttered and unclean, and Raine's brows lumped in an uneasy frown.

"A man who'd let his office get in this shape sure as thunder couldn't be the kind of gent Bert Mossman says Sam Bedford is!" Raine muttered. "Maybe I better hunt up the post-office and see if that letter of instruction Bert Mossman said I'd find here has arrived yet."

"Snoop around in my office, will yuh, Injun!" a voice roared behind the Ranger.

A booted foot caught Navajo Tom Raine from behind, sent him staggering into the office. Before he could get turned around there was the rush of

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quick feet behind him, the sharp odor of bay rum vieing with the whiskey laden breath of a man who had seized him by an arm.

Raine's green eyes looked glassy, and there was a kind of tom-tom sound pounding in his ears. A big, hulking man was clutching his arm, glaring at him out of black eyes that were set in a broad, blunt-jawed red face. Raine saw a white Stetson, crimson shirt with a canary-yellow neckerchief at a corded throat. The tom-tom music in his ears got wild and fast as he rocked his head to let a big fist slide past his cheek.

Then Raine's right fist came smoking up from the level of his hips and popped against the broad, newly shaven chin, and there was a howl of amazement from the crowd that had come banking around the door. The burly man sprawled backwards, the fancy white Stetson bouncing off neatly trimmed hair that was shiny and black and very curly. But mostly Raine's glinting eyes were on the badge that was pinned to the front of the burly man's shirt front.

"Injun, Sheriff Dan Muller will kill you for doin' that to him!" a shrill voice bleated from outside.

Raine heard, but said nothing. The badge on Dan Muller's shirt front was an oversized star, gold plated and brightly polished. SHERIFF was spelled across the face of that fancy badge with closely set stones that were red enough and bright enough to be genuine rubies.

"Judas Priest!" Raine groaned.

A man stepped in past the fallen sheriff, moved a little to one side, and was standing there, watching Raine. The black-eyed man was slim, of medium height. He had neatly combed black hair, blue cloth sleeve protectors that reached from wrists to his elbows, and wore a black string tie fastened in a celluloid collar that fitted his neck snugly.

"What's the trouble here?" the man asked, and Raine was amazed at the cool authority in the even voice.

"Git back to that Mercantile of yores, Walt Brady!" a man outside howled. "Me and these other friends of Dan Muller's know how to take care of that Injun."

THE speaker was directly before the door—a big, bull-necked jasper with coarse, loose-lipped features and a pair of mean eyes. The fellow had a fist clapped over the butt of a holstered pistol, and when a voice or two lifted in support of his remarks, he started up the three steps.

"Hold it, fellow!" Raine said sharply.

The man stopped, then glanced hastily over his shoulder. Two more equally rough looking hombres were moving towards the steps, and the big man took heart.

"Who yuh orderin' around, Injun?" he sneered.

"I'm orderin' you to stay where you are, Ike Dover!" Raine said flatly. "That goes for Ollie Ford and 'Boots' Vinton, who seem to think they'll back your play. You three simmer down, or I'll remember that the Rangers want to ask you a few questions about a bunch of horses that turned up missin' on a ranch over Two Forks way, a while back."

The two men who had crowded up behind big Ike Dover jumped back. Ollie Ford, a small, dark, quick-moving fellow with chill, pale eyes, bumped into big, blubbery-fat Boots Vinton with such force they both staggered.

"Raine!" Ollie Vinton squalled in a shrill, tight voice.

"What's the matter, Ford, you got the drunken horrors?" some man laughed. "The sun's out, there ain't a cloud in the sky, so how could it be rainin'?"

Ollie Ford kicked the man in the stomach who had joshed him, shoved past his sagging body, and moved quickly away, fat Boots Vinton waddling after him.

"Navajo Tom Raine, the Arizona Ranger?" Ike Dover gulped.

He backed off the steps without waiting for a reply. He glanced at the tall, grizzled man writhing on the ground where Ollie Ford's kick had put him, muttered uneasily, then spotted his two retreating companions and hurried after them.

"So you're Navajo Raine, eh?" the slim man Ike Dover had called Walt Brady broke the stiff silence that had fallen.

Raine glanced at Brady, saw the man's thin mouth grinning faintly. Brady's black eyes were raking the Ranger up and down in probing glances. Then he stared steadily at the Ranger's hat, his attention focused, Raine thought, on those two bullet holes in the Stetson crown.

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"I'm Raine," the Ranger said. "From Ike Dover's remarks, I reckon you're a local merchant. Maybe you can tell me when a man named Sam Bedford turned the Sheriff's job over to this big sport?"

Raine flicked a hand towards Dan Muller, who was sitting up, muttering angrily. Muller cursed thickly and started getting up, his face bleak.

"Easy, Dan!" Walt Brady said crisply. "This man is Navajo Tom Raine, Arizona Ranger."

Dan Muller was on his feet, powerful shoulders hunched, big fists cocked for action. But Walt Brady's words seemed to freeze him.

"A blasted Ranger nosin' around here!" he gulped. "Walt, what'll we do?"

"Smooth our feathers and behave," Walt Brady laughed easily. "Raine has already spotted Ike Dover, Ollie Ford and Boots Vinton."

Raine's sharp eyes stabbed at Walt Brady. There was a grin on the merchant's face, and a sharp gleam in his eyes that could have been amusement.

"By the way, Raine," Brady said quickly. "I have the postoffice in my store. There's a letter there, addressed to you. It came three days ago."

"Thanks," Raine said drily. "Soon as I get things squared with Muller, here, I'll drop around and pick it up."

"Stick around, Raine!" big Dan Muller said coldly. "I'll step down the street with Walt, pick me up a drink or two then come back and see if you're as tough as you think you are."

Dan Muller swaggered out the door, scooping up his fancy Stetson as he quit his office. Walt Brady was beside him, smiling as he talked to the big dude. Raine pulled the spur out of his pocket, looked at Sam Bedford's name on the shank for a moment, and tossed the spur down on the paper littered desk there in Dan Muller's office.

CHAPTER III

Sam Bedford, Ex-Sheriff

A WOMAN'S voice outside drew Navajo Tom Raine's attention. There was still a sizable crowd out there, and the cold anger glinted in Raine's eyes as he heard a man make a jeering reply to something the woman had said. Raine strode to the door, then down the steps into the hot, bright sunlight.

The lanky man Ollie Ford had kicked in the stomach was on his feet, but leaning heavily against a slim, yellow-haired girl who had an arm about him. The man's leathery face was still white with pain, and his gray eyes looked glazed as he brushed weakly at ropes of grizzled hair that clung damply to his forehead.

The girl was talking to a lanky, brown-haired young man with a bunch of cowpunchers.

"Take these Boxed T men of yours and go on about your business, Link!" she was saying sharply. "Dad is in no condition to talk to you."

Link grinned sourly, moving purposely forward.

"You simmer down, Grace," he drawled. "While that daddy of yores is sorta stove-up would be a good time for me to get him to answer questions without havin' him jump on me."

The girl tossed her blond head, took hold of her father's sagging shoulders with both hands.

"Come along, Dad!" she said gravely. "I'll lift your gun out of its holster and use it on Link Topley and his cowhands if they get too frisky."

Raine stepped forward, green eyes a little angry. He did not seem to hurry, yet he covered ground fast.

"When the sign is right, Grace, I'll take some of the sass and vinegar out of you!" Link Topley grunted.

"Since when," Raine's voice lashed out, "did things get so bad in this town that a nice girl can't be on the street without some brush ape shootin' off his mouth?"

Link Topley came around like a lean cat, spinning on the balls of his feet.

"I heard somebody say you're Navajo Tom Raine, the Arizona Ranger!" he snapped. "But unless yuh want me to beat Dan Muller to the pleasure of whippin' yore ears down, get your nose out of my business."

"Take your father into the office, there, Miss, where he can sit down and rest a while," Raine said quietly.

The girl's eyes were on him, and Raine saw gratitude in their blue depths. She started to speak, but Link Topley shot out a long arm, and grabbed at her

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shoulder. The girl spun her father, sliding out of Topley's reach. Then Navajo Raine closed in, took Link Topley by the arm, and spun him around, grinning flatly when he saw Topley's hand streak down for twin guns.

"Tough, eh?" Raine asked, and put his hundred and eighty pounds behind a left hook that brought Link Topley's spurred boots up where his sweat-marked hat had been.

The girl and her father both shouted something, but Raine did not hear their words. He was looking at Topley's tough crew of Boxed T riders, and the flat grin was still on his wide mouth.

"Whoa, boys!" one of the bunch grunted. "Plaguin' Grace and her daddy was Link's notion, not ours."

"What's the matter, Elmer, yuh lost the sand outa yore craw?" a sawed-off, ornery looking rider close to the speaker asked angrily.

Elmer laughed, but there was no mirth in the deep sound.

"Take your father on inside the sheriff's office, Miss!" the Ranger said almost sharply.

"Nothin' doin'!" the grizzled man croaked. "I swore I'd never set foot inside that office again until—"

"Dad, you're coming inside!" the girl cut in, and from the tail of his eye Raine saw her spin the obstinate man, take him up the steps in stumbling lurches until he was inside.

"Thanks, Elmer Whoever-you-are, for talkin' sense into your *companeros*," Raine said quietly.

"Don't mention it, Raine," the barrel-chested man grinned coldly. "I'm Elmer Lafferty, and I've ramrodded the Boxed T since Link, there, was in knee britches."

RAINE turned his back on the Boxed T men and went up the steps into the sheriff's office, watching the gaunt old man who sat in the swivel chair behind the desk. The oldster held the spur Raine had tossed down upon the desk earlier, scowling in a puzzled way.

"You folks happen to recognize that spur, by any chance?" Raine asked casually.

"I ought to recognize it," the old man grinned wryly. "This spur belongs to me. It's one of a pair I overlooked, somehow, when I gathered up my stuff in this office, eight months back."

"You're Sam Bedford?" Raine asked sharply.

"I'm Sam Bedford," the old man nodded. "The county commissioners made out like they thought I was usin' my badge to protect stock thieves and bounty-plastered outlaws—for a price. They fired me, Raine. So I'm ex-Sheriff Sam Bedford. The young lady is my daughter, Grace."

Raine smiled at the girl, touched his hat.

"Don't let Dad's moaning about his troubles fool you, Tom Raine!" she said. "He's splitting at the seams with curiosity, wanting to know whether or not his friend, Bert Mossman, heard of his troubles and sent you here to help him."

"As a matter of fact," the Ranger said soberly, "I've got no idea why I'm here."

"How do you mean that?" Sam Bedford asked quickly.

"I was at Horseshoe Hill, east of here," Raine explained, "when a deputy sheriff from Casa Grande looked me up and told me that Bert Mossman had sent word for me to ride over to Wagon Gap, pick up a letter, and proceed accordin' to instructions in said letter."

"The letter didn't mention Dad, or the troubles he's had?" Grace Bedford asked in surprise.

"I don't know, because I haven't had the letter yet," Raine replied gravely. "But someone sure knew I was comin' here, and whoever it was didn't like the idea a little bit."

Raine pulled the hat off his head, punched the tip of a finger through the two holes in the Stetson crown for emphasis, as he told Sam Bedford and his daughter about the bushwhacking. When Raine explained about the spur, Sam Bedford dropped it, face turning gray as he stared down at it where it fell among the papers on the untidy desk.

"Dad!" Grace cried tensely. "You went down the river this morning to look at those cattle Walt told you about."

"Good grief, young un!" her father gulped. "*You* don't think I tried to bushwhack this boy, do you?"

"Of course not!" the girl said. "But someone obviously meant for you to be accused of murdering him. They watched you, Dad, and sprung another trap!"

"They?" Raine probed quickly.

"Every bit of trouble Dad has had, has

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been due to just such cowardly frame-ups as this attempt on your life was, Tom Raine," Grace Bedford said gravely. "We have no idea who is doing these things, so we simply refer to the plotters as 'they.' "

"Maybe we ain't so far in the dark as them sneakin' plotters think we are!" Sam Bedford burst out angrily.

"Dad, what do you mean?" Grace asked excitedly.

Raine's own attention sharpened. The ex-sheriff was on his feet, coming around the desk.

"Grace, you wait here with Tom Raine!" the old man said. "I'm aimin' to collar a certain jasper. When I get back, maybe I'll have important news."

Raine started to say something, but closed his lips when he saw big Dan Muller come off the boardwalk towards the front steps. Muller's handsome face was flushed, and there was a mean glitter in his eyes as he passed Sam Bedford on the steps without speaking. Then Dan Muller was in the office, grinning coldly as he kicked the door shut behind him.

"Get yoreself a ringside seat, Grace, but don't git underfoot," Muller rumbled. "Put them fists up, Raine. I'm comin' at yuh!"

CHAPTER IV

Shocking News

MORE trouble with Dan Muller was the last thing Navajo Tom Raine wanted. The Ranger took a raking blow along the side of the face that hurt, then jumped out of reach when Muller tried to wrap mighty arms around him.

"Muller, listen to me!" Raine said harshly. "We're peace officers, not a couple of saloon rowdies. Simmer down, man!"

"Scared, hey!" Dan Muller whooped.

"Muller, be reasonable!" the Ranger snapped. "I don't want to brawl with you."

Raine's voice ended on a groan. Dan Muller had come sliding towards him, easing up as if he hoped to slip in punching distance before Raine guessed his intentions. But suddenly his right boot ripped up in a vicious kick, and Raine groaned when he whirled to take the blow on his thigh.

"Dan, you rotten coward!" Grace Bedford cried.

"I'll box yore ears for that remark, when I git my chores done with this Raine snoop!" Muller panted, and leaped in, throwing a punch that caught Raine on the cheek.

Already off balance from the savage kick, Raine went tumbling when Muller's fist hammered his face. He saw Muller leap into the air, knew that he meant to land on him with those spiked boot heels. And suddenly Navajo Raine's patience ran out.

Raine sprang to his feet, jumped away from another savage kick, then ducked under a roundhouse right that would have floored him again, had it connected.

"Tear into him, Tom Raine!" Grace Bedford cried. "Whip him until he admits that he has no more legal right to wear that fancy badge than I would have!"

Raine heard the words clearly, and would have given a lot to have been able to ask the excited girl a few questions. But the Ranger saw Dan Muller slue around and start towards him again.

Coolly, the Ranger pedaled back, as if he meant to retreat again. Muller growled an oath and lunged, only to find himself hanging there in the air, while brown fists slammed his midriff like the hoofs of a kicking horse. Dan Muller gagged, reeled backwards, and threw a clumsy punch. The tall Ranger slithered back, then brought one up from his boot tops that exploded against Muller's chin.

"Crazy—galoot!" Raine chuckled, and caught big Dan Muller as he pitched forward, easing him down to the floor.

"What was that you said, a while ago, about Muller havin' no right to wear that pretty badge?" Raine asked Grace Bedford.

"I talk too much," the girl said quietly. "But a lot of us *do* think Dan Muller hoisted himself into the sheriff's office with a lie."

"How come?" Raine asked.

"When Dad was ousted, old Joe Hartley, who had been Dad's deputy for almost ten years, was elevated to acting sheriff," the girl said soberly. "But about two months after he took office, Joe got a tip that a bunch of horse thieves meant to swim a band of stolen

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horses across the river to Nevada, and came out to the ranch and tried to deputize Dad to help him. Dad refused, naturally. Joe went on up the river, alone. His body was found at Rainbow Bend, the next day. Poor old Joe had been shot in the back with buckshot. Neither his pistol nor his rifle had been fired."

"Cold-blooded murder!" Raine said grimly. "Who sent the actin' sheriff up there to look for horse thieves?"

"I don't know," the girl said steadily. "Joe didn't tell Dad."

"Dan Muller wound up as your sheriff, after this Joe Hartley's death?"

THE girl answered gravely, "Dan was in town, wearing an old deputy's badge that had been around Dad's office for years, and swore that Joe Hartley deputized him. But Dan Muller was Link Topley's bronc rider, and Joe Hartley knew him for exactly what he is—a loudmouthed, overbearing tough and bully. Joe Hartley simply would not have deputized Dan Muller."

"How about the county commissioners?" Raine asked. "Couldn't they take Dan Muller's badge away from him, and appoint someone else?"

"That bunch of old grandmas!" the girl retorted. "They mewed and mumbled and acted pious, just as they did when my father was accused of being a horse thief."

"Hmmm!" Raine mused. "And what's this about Sheriff Sam Bedford bein' suspected of stealin' horses, Miss?"

"I'm Grace to my friends, Tom," the girl said gravely. "And no one honestly suspected Dad of being a horse thief. He was simply dangerous to someone, as sheriff. That someone used that flimsy frame-up to get him kicked out of office."

"Link Topley?" Raine asked.

"Frankly, I doubt if Link framed my father," the girl said quietly. "But someone put twenty head of horses in our Star B pasture, down yonder on the river. Whoever put the horses there had done a very clumsy job of blotching Link Topley's Boxed T brand on their hips. Dad laughed at Link when Link asked him if he was using his badge to cover horse-stealing. Link got sore because Dad laughed. Dad told him to come back for his twenty head of blotch-branded horses when he could behave himself."

"So Link ran to the county commissioners and raised a fuss?" Raine frowned.

"Not until someone sneaked in that night and drove those horses away," the girl said. "Link got really sore, thinking Dad had put the horses across the river into Nevada with our ferry."

Raine glanced down at Dan Muller, who had groaned, and was beginning to stir groggily. The Ranger scowled, reached over and took the gun out of Muller's holster, and tossed it into a far corner of the room.

"A ferry business, as well as ranchin'." Raine smiled. "Sam Bedford will get along, even if he never wears his badge again."

"Dad says buying the ranch is very probably the reason he got into trouble," Grace declared.

"How so?" the Ranger wanted to know.

"The place belonged to Old Man Whipple, who was a very shady character," Grace declared. "The bottoms out there are densely timbered, and rough, broken hills march right down to them. Old Man Whipple made a lot of money handling stolen stock with his ferry, and hiding outlaws out in those dense bottoms. But someone shot the old rascal, over in Nevada, a year ago. Soon after that, Dad bought the ranch from Mr. Whipple's widow."

"And stepped in ahead of somebody who wanted to keep on usin' the place as an outlaw roost, most likely!" Raine said sharply.

"That's the way Dad figures it, too," the girl nodded. "But so far, whoever wants that place has been mighty quiet about it, for Dad has not had a single offer from anyone."

"Anybody own joinin' property?" Raine wanted to know.

"Walt Brady has four hundred acres, which lies upriver from our land," Grace answered. "Walt buys up a few calves now and then and puts them out there to graze. Dad says he does that just to have an excuse for dropping past our place."

The slight flush that touched the girl's cheeks, and the sparkle in her eyes, told Raine plainly enough what she meant.

"I don't blame Walt Brady a bit," Raine smiled.

"I like Walt, but only as a friend," the girl said candidly. "I was in love with

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Link Topley until he turned against Dad—"

Grace broke off as feet pounded outside, and the door flapped open.

"Walt, what's wrong?" the girl cried.

Walt Brady came in, shiny black eyes cutting a quick look at Raine. The young merchant's face was white, and his hands were trembling as he went straight to Grace Bedford, took hold of her shoulders.

"I'm sorry to be the one to bring the news, Grace, but something has happened to your father," Brady said gravely.

"No, Walt!" the girl gasped. "He isn't—"

Her voice choked off as Walt Brady nodded.

"That letter addressed to you is missing from my post-office, Raine," Brady said evenly. "Sam Bedford came down and called for it, said he meant to bring it up here to you. When I looked for the letter, it was gone. But I remembered that a certain man had gone behind the partition and helped himself to mail, only shortly before. That is against rules, and I had—"

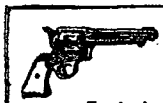
"The devil with ramblin' talk, Brady!" Raine bit the words out savagely. "What happened to Sam Bedford?"

Brady's thin mouth tightened, and the black eyes watched Raine unwinkingly.

"The man I chased out from behind the partition where the mail is kept was Elmer Lafferty," Brady said with impudent s'owness. "I told Sam Bedford that, but certainly did not accuse Lafferty of taking your letter. Mr. Bedford left, said he would hunt Lafferty up and ask him about it. They are down back of the livery barn, shot to ribbons, each with a gun beside him."

"Tom, come on!" Grace Bedford gasped, and was suddenly beside the Ranger, urging him towards the door.

Raine glanced down, started to speak to her, tell her to wait there until he had investigated. But the words locked behind his teeth. The girl's eyes were trying to say something she had not put into words.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CHAPTER V

Killers Cornered

WORD of the tragedy had spread fast, and Navajo Raine's stride quickened when he saw men boiling along the boardwalks. They were heading east, towards a big livery barn and wagon yard. Grace Bedford, still clutching the Ranger's arm, began quickening her own stride.

"Tom, I wanted to tell you something where no one else could hear," the girl's choked voice brought a pang of pity to the Ranger.

"What is it, Grace?" he asked kindly.

"Dad and Elmer Lafferty would never have fought each other!" she said shakily. "Oh, they've pretended to be enemies, ever since this trouble started. But actually they were the best of friends, and working hand-in-glove to find out who framed Dad, then murdered poor old Joe Hartley."

"Thanks, girl, for lettin' me know about that," Raine said grimly. "Your daddy had spotted one of the men behind his troubles, no doubt of that. And that cuss evidently knew that your father and Lafferty were friends, so he wanted them both out of the way. But you better wait here, while I go see about your dad."

They were even with the town's one hotel, and as Raine spoke he moved to the steps, feeling the girl hold back a little, as if she meant to protest. Then a shivery sound came from her throat, and she went up the steps and into the lobby, letting Raine seat her in a deep chair.

"Don't leave me here too long, Tom," she said, and Raine could barely hear the words.

"No longer than it takes me to go down there, see what's what, and get back," he promised.

The girl nodded, and Raine turned, heading quickly across the lobby and outside again, wishing the clerk or whoever was supposed to be on duty in the hotel had been around. Then the Ranger was on the boardwalk, heading along the street at a trot, following the crowd to the wagon yard and on around the tall board fence. There was a rapidly growing crowd bunched up where tall

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brush crowded close to the fence, but a big, bald-headed man stood in the middle of that crowd with a double-barreled shotgun in his hands, warning the neck-craning, jabbering bunch to keep back.

"Quit crowdin', blame yore hides!" the bald man was howling.

"Put that shotgun up, Grigg Sobey, and git back to yore barn chores!" a deep voice boomed.

"That's enough out of you, Dover!" Navajo Raine's voice cut in coldly.

Ike Dover swore, pivoting around fast, a drawn pistol in his big hand. He blinked at Raine, swore again, then hastily shoved the pistol into holster when fat Boots Vinton and scrawny little Ollie Ford crowded up behind him, both of them speaking in such low tones Raine did not hear their words.

"Well, well!" Ike Dover leered. "If it ain't Navajo Tom Raine, the wonder-boy Arizona Ranger."

Raine knelt beside Elmer Lafferty's body. Lafferty had taken one bullet in the face, another in the throat, and two in the chest. A six-shooter lay beside him, and Raine picked it up, saw that three shells were spent in the chamber. The Ranger put the gun down, looked at Lafferty's bloody face, and shook his head. The man was stone dead.

Raine turned to Sam Bedford, who lay less than three feet from Lafferty's body. The Ranger picked up Bedford's gun, saw that four cartridges had been fired from its cylinder. He was laying the gun down again, bending over close to Sam Bedford, when he saw the man's nostrils flutter.

"Sobey, send somebody you can count on to fetch a sawbones!" Raine snapped the words out. "Bedford is alive."

There was an instant stir in the now thickly packed crowd.

"Sawbones, my eye!" Ike Dover was yowling. "Men, don't let that Injun-raised Raine heller fool yuh. With three slugs in his briskit, Sam Bedford shore ain't alive."

BIG GRIGG SOBEY was yelling at some fellow he called Charlie, telling him to fetch Doc Tinker. Raine turned his attention back to Sam Bedford. There were three bullet holes in the front of Sam Bedford's shirt.

"Who got here ahead of you, Sobey?" Raine asked the big man.

"Nary a soul, Raine!" the barn man said promptly: "When I heard guns cut loose out here, I snatched up this scattergun and got here, fast. Bob Sartin, a young feller who works for me at the barn, was with me. Them two was layin' like they are now, and I sent Bob to spread the word."

"You didn't see anybody leavin' here?" Raine asked.

"Me and Bob both heard some kind of a racket in that brush," Sobey said gravely. "But when we clumb up to the top of the fence, there was nothin' or nobody in sight."

"And you haven't let anybody see these men at close range, Sobey?" Raine asked.

"Nobody got close enough to see them two bodies well enough to say how many slugs one of 'em had stopped," Grigg Sobey said flatly. "That what yuh're wonderin' about, Raine?"

"Exactly!" the Ranger said, and came to his feet.

"Make way for the Doc, men!" a voice called at the far edge of the crowd.

Raine's eyes moved in that direction, saw the lane start opening to let a stocky, red-headed man come forward, a black bag in one hand.

"Open up!" Raine called sharply. "Let the doctor through, men."

He paced forward as he talked, facing the advancing doctor. And from the tail of his eye, the Ranger saw Ike Dover, Boots Vinton and Ollie Ford, watching him with wary eyes as he brushed past them. Ike Dover jerked his head at his two companions, turned as Raine walked past, and started to bore into the crowd, Boots Vinton and Ollie Ford following.

"Elevate, you three!" Raine's voice was like a whip cracking in the air.

Ike Dover jerked around, alarm in his blood-shot eyes. The alarm changed to something like panic when he saw Raine standing there, green eyes shining like polished glass, a turquoise-butted six-shooter in each hand. Ollie Ford and Boots Vinton looked suddenly ill, for they were within arm's reach of those deadly black guns that slanted from the Ranger's hands.

"Wh-what's into yuh, Tom Raine?" Ike Dover croaked.

"If I told you right here, Ike, this crowd might decide to handle you three in a pretty rough way. I'm lockin' you three up."

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The doctor went past, sharp blue eyes turning to Raine for an instant.

"Work on Sam Bedford, Doctor," Raine said. "Lafferty's dead. And see if those two men haven't been walloped on their heads good and hard, and recently!"

"Right," the doctor said, and was gone past Raine.

"You're crazier than a cage full of monkeys, Raine!" fat Boots Vinton snorted.

But the man's puffy face had a sick, gray look, and Raine saw that Ike Dover and Ollie Ford were both pale and tense, beginning to roll their eyes at the suddenly hushed crowd.

"Unbuckle those gun belts, you three!" Raine rapped.

The three toughs shed their gun belts, but Raine kept his guns trained on them, just the same.

The crowd was whispering excitedly now, watching Raine and his three prisoners attentively.

"Doc Tinker says Elmer Lafferty and Sam Bedford both have lumps on their heads, where they've been hit recent and plenty hard, Raine!" Grigg Sobey called out loudly.

RAINE told him, "You or the doctor search Lafferty's pockets. He ought to have a letter on him, addressed to me."

"I seen a envelope stickin' out of Lafferty's hip pocket a while ago, and took it out," Grigg Sobey replied. "It's addressed to yuh, here at Wagon Gap, Tom. Only there ain't no letter in the envelope."

"What was Elmer Lafferty doin' with a letter of yores?" Ike Dover asked Raine slyly.

"Elmer Lafferty never had my letter," Raine snapped. "The men who murdered him and tried to murder Sam Bedford planted that envelope in his pocket."

Suddenly Ike Dover cursed thickly, nodded jerkily to his companions, and started shuffling away. Ollie Ford and Boots Vinton followed him closely, and a lane formed quickly in the crowd, letting Navajo Raine herd his three prisoners towards the jail.

"How much chance does Sam Bedford have, Doctor?" Raine called.

"Can't say, Raine," the medico called. "But his heart is steady. At a guess, I'd say he has a good chance of living."

CHAPTER VI

Dan Muller Dies

TOM RAINE was panting a little, and sweat streaked his lean face as he hurried from the jail down the boardwalk and into the hotel lobby where he had left Grace Bedford. He halted inside the lobby door, eyes raking the room keenly. He whirled on a stubby, moon-faced young fellow who leaned on the hotel desk, picking his teeth.

"Where's Grace Bedford?" Raine asked.

"I went out and et dinner, and she wasn't there when I left," the man grunted. "I ain't saw her since I got back, neither."

The fat man's jaw sagged slowly open as from somewhere overhead came a man's hoarse cry of fear, followed by two quick shots. Boots rattled over board flooring, ending with the faint sound of a door slamming. Raine glanced at the moon-faced hotel clerk, who was coming from behind the desk.

"Dan, what's wrong, up there?" the squabby youth yelled.

"Dan Muller, eh?" Raine asked sharply.

"Shut up, you blasted snoop!" the fat youth panted.

Raine made no reply. His eyes were on big Dan Muller, who had reeled into view at the stair head, both hands clamped to his midriff. Muller's face was terribly white, and his eyes had a set, glassy look.

"Dan, who shot you?" the pudgy hotel clerk wailed.

Raine reached out, closed a strong hand over the fat fellow's lumpy shoulder. Dan Muller had pitched over on his face, and was coming down the stairs, in a sprawling tumble. He stopped with his hips and legs on the lobby floor, shoulders on the steps, bloody hands flung out as if he had braced himself there. But the set, unmoving eyes told the Ranger that the phony sheriff had come to trail's end.

Raine plunged up the creaking stairs two at a time. He saw a long hallway stretching before him, but whirled towards a door where a chair sat squarely before it. Dan Muller's fancy white

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Stetson was on the floor beside the chair.

"Grace!" he called sharply.

"Tom, help!" the girl's voice was a wail, coming through the door.

Raine twisted the knob, grunted when the door refused to budge. He backed up, and hit the door with one hunched shoulder. He rebounded, slammed the door harder still, and went into the room at a stumbling run.

"I'm alone, Tom!" Grace Bedford gasped. "But get me out of these ropes."

SHE was lying on the floor, wrists and ankles bound by a stout cord. Dan Muller's canary yellow neckerchief was down around her chin and throat, and there was a wadded white handkerchief near her face that had obviously been a gag in her mouth until she had worked it loose.

"Easy, little lady," Raine said gently. "Your Dad is alive, and the doc says he has a chance, anyhow."

"Oh, thank heavens!" the girl said shakily, and held her wrists still while Raine sliced the cords.

"How did Dan Muller get hold of you, anyhow?" the Ranger asked a moment later, helping the shaken girl to her feet.

"He tricked me, confound him!" she said sharply. "He came into the lobby, said there was a man up here in this room who had witnessed a gunfight between my father and Elmer Lafferty. Dan said this man wanted to talk to me, and I came up here."

"What was the idea?" Raine asked soberly.

"Dan was so scared about something he had the shakes," the girl declared. "He would not tell me why he was scared, but he did say that he meant to hold me here until dark, then sneak me down the back stairs and take me to Mexico, Tom!"

"Who came up here and shot Muller?" Raine asked.

"Didn't you?" Grace Bedford cried in surprise.

"I was trying to get something out of a fat, white-eyed young galoot who doesn't seem to cotton to me," the Ranger shrugged.

"Ebbie Cotter, the hotel clerk, was in cahoots with Dan Muller!" the girl declared. "I heard Ebbie and Dan talking outside the door, and heard Dan ask Ebbie for a chair. Then, not long after that, I heard someone come along the hall from the back way. Dan gave a sort of startled yell, and a gun was fired. When I heard you out there, I thought you had fired that shot, Tom. But if you didn't, Dan Muller will be back, and you'll have trouble with him."

"Dan Muller won't pester anybody else, Grace," Raine said soberly. "Somebody put two slugs through him, and he's stone dead."

"Then the man who came up here must have shot Dan," the girl said soberly. "He came in the back way, up the back stairs. But if that fellow knew Dan had me prisoner, and meant to help me, why did he run away after the shooting?"

"Headin' for Mexico with you was Dan Muller's own private idea," Raine said soberly. "The man who killed Dan Muller figures on marryin' you and gettin' that ranch your Dad bought. He's a pretty slippery customer, Grace. His try at murderin' me and gettin' your father hanged for the crime failed. He had some of his men capture your daddy and Elmer Lafferty, then shoot them with their own guns and make it look like they had shot each other."

"Tom, you know him?" the girl cried.

"I know him," Raine said simply.

"But how could you?" Grace asked tensely. "You've been in town only a few hours!"

"The tip-off was that attempt to murder me this mornin'," Raine said quietly. "One man, and *only* one man, could possibly have known that I was due to arrive here."

"Tom Raine!" Grace Bedford gasped. "You don't, you simply *can't* mean that the man behind all these terrible things is—"

"Shhh!" Raine hissed, clamping his hand over the girl's mouth.

CHAPTER VII

Ranger's Gun-Reckoning

IN the hallway a board had squealed, and now both Raine and the girl heard the unmistakable sound of booted feet easing along. Raine glanced frantically at the splintered door, standing open a foot or so. Then he turned the girl around, rushed her across the room

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to the window, and warned her to silence as he reached down, grasped a coil of stout rope, and tossed it outside. But one end of the rope was tied to a stout iron ring fastened to the wall just beneath the window.

"Can you shinny down that fire escape rope, Grace?" Raine asked tensely.

For an answer she swung her booted feet outside, took hold of the rope, and looked at him out of frightened eyes.

"Luck, Tom!" she whispered. "I'll bring help!"

She dropped from sight, and Raine turned, green eyes cold and bright as he watched the splintered door across the room. He could hear those stealthy steps more plainly now, and knew that they were before the door.

"Come on in, Brady, but leave your friends outside!" Raine called suddenly.

"Boss, he's spotted us!" a hoarse voice boomed, and Navajo Raine jumped in surprise, for that voice belonged to Ike Dover!

Raine lifted himself until he was carrying his weight on his toes, then eased back to the window, felt behind him until he found the fire escape rope, and pulled on it. The rope was free, and the Ranger grinned a little, lifted a leg and started to ease over the sill. But suddenly there was a slam of fee near the door; then Walt Brady was stepping into the room, face red and angry, black eyes glittering as he saw Raine lurch, come away from the window.

"Where's Grace?" Brady's voice was flat, ugly.

"I'll ask the questions, you bush-whackin' devil!" Raine snapped at him. "And the first thing I want to know is how Ike Dover happens to be here with you?"

"I let Ike and Ollie Ford and Boots Vinton out of jail!" Walt Brady snapped. "It happens that there were a set of duplicate keys in Muller's desk, in case you're interested. Ebbie Cotter, the hotel clerk, came and told me that someone had murdered the sheriff, up here, and that Grace Bedford was locked in this room. Where is the girl, Raine?"

"Brother, you've got nerve," Raine said flatly. "But your game is up, Brady. Or did your men, Ike Dover, Ollie Ford and Boots Vinton, have sense enough to tell you that the slugs you had them pump into Sam Bedford never killed him?"

"What's that?" Walt Brady rasped, and his head jerked around, black eyes stabbing towards Ike Dover and fat Boots Vinton, who were peering cautiously around the door facing.

"Raine's a liar, boss," Boots Vinton grunted. "Him and that sawbones, Doc Tinker, was both yappin' somethin' about Sam Bedford bein' alive. But that just ain't possible."

"Ike Dover made a bad slip down there a while ago, Brady," Raine said flatly. "He mentioned that Sam Bedford had been shot three times, yet he had never been close enough to Bedford, after Bedford and Elmer Lafferty were discovered, to have known that."

"Dover, you and Ford and Vinton get in here!" Walt Brady said harshly.

"Nothin' doin', boss!" Ollie Ford's voice ripped out.

"Us three can take Raine from here, any time we want to!" Ike Dover laughed coldly. "See this gun snout o' mine, boss? I've got Raine covered, and if yuh'll move over a mite—"

IKE DOVER'S voice was drowned in a gun's roar. Walt Brady swore jarringly, yanking at a gun as he leaped towards a corner of the big dresser in the room. Raine's hands were gun-filled, the one in his right fist smoking as he watched Ike Dover's hulking figure sag down across the doorway.

A gun bucked out there in the hallway, and Raine winced as a bullet cut a gash across his left cheek. Then his turquoise butted guns were blazing steadily, and he was hurtling towards the door, aware that his shots had knocked scrawny little Ollie Ford tumbling, and that fat Boots Vinton was backing along the hallway, towards the stair head. Raine felt a slug from one of Vinton's guns cut skin across his right side, and stopped astride Ike Dover's body, both guns spitting red-tipped thunder.

But suddenly Raine felt a hammering blow against his left thigh, and pitched over sidewise, twisting as he fell. The shot had come from inside the room, and he saw Walt Brady cowering behind the dresser, black eyes blazing coldly over the barrel of a sixshooter he was leveling with both hands. Raine's right hand Colt bucked, but just as he fired a bullet slanted in from the hallway, ripping across the top of his left shoulder.

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"Nailed him!" Boots Vinton brayed. "How's that for shootin', boss? Empty yore gun into him afore the tricky son—"

Boots Vinton's voice was drowned in a thundering blast of gunfire that came from down in the hotel lobby. Raine's head was spinning, and pain was making him weak and sick. But he saw Walt Brady slant his gun over the dresser top again, and start taking careful aim once more.

Raine's left hand Colt belched flame and smoke, and Walt Brady plunged out into the middle of the floor, moaning in pain as he clutched a bullet shattered right wrist with his left hand. He started to curse Raine savagely, but the oaths died on his ashen lips as Link Topley jumped into the room, two of his tough crew crowding in behind him.

"We're friends, Raine!" Link sang out. "Grace come and asked me for help."

"Thanks, Link," Raine said wearily. "Did you and your boys nab Boots Vinton?"

"Nab him!" Link snorted. Raine, that fat son is Boothill bait. You hurt bad, *amigo?*"

Raine looked up at the lanky young cowman, surprised at the friendliness in Topley's voice. The Boxed T owner seemed to savvy Raine's surprise, and suddenly there was a twinkle in his hard eyes as he grinned.

"That wallop you laid on my jaw knocked more sense into me than anything has in a long time, Raine," Link Topley said. "I didn't know how my devilin' Sam Bedford looked to others until you belted me for it. I liked that old coot, and all I've ever had in mind was just naturally proddin' him into tellin' me why he moved them blotch-branded hosses off his range."

Raine got to his feet, reloaded and holstered his guns, then limped over and took hold of Brady's shoulder.

"If the sawbones can spare the time from lookin' after Sam Bedford, I'll see that you get that arm fixed," the Ranger said grimly. "But you're comin' to jail, and the charge is murder."

"Murder?" Walt Brady croaked. "You fool, name anybody I've killed."

"Joe Hartley, the deputy sheriff who was murdered up at Rainbow Bend, a while back, is one man I think you murdered," Raine said flatly. "And you came up here and put two bullets through Dan Muller, a while ago."

"All right!" Brady admitted. "Dan Muller was wearin' a badge he had no business to wear, and was holdin' Grace Bedford prisoner, here in this room. Sure, I shot him. And no jury will ever stick me. But I didn't shoot Joe Hartley."

"Aim to claim some of yore boys, Ike Dover, Boots Vinton or Ollie Ford killed Joe Hartley, eh?" Raine snorted.

"He's a liar if he does, Raine," Ollie Ford's thin voice said bitterly. "He poured buckshot into that Joe Hartley feller's back up at Rainbow Bend, all right. Me and Boots Vinton and Ike Dover was there, watchin' from the brush. We've been holdin' that over Brady's head, makin' him pay us high wages for easy work, ever since."

"Try to stick my neck in a noose, will you?" Walt Brady panted. "All right, smart boy, who pumped lead into Sam Bedford and Elmer Lafferty today? Tell Raine that!"

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RAINE looked steadily at scrawny Ollie Ford, who was in the doorway, supported by two of Link Topley's hard-case Boxed T cowhands. Ford's right shoulder was bloody, the arm hanging limply at his side.

"Sure, Brady, I'll tell Raine about Sam Bedford and Elmer Lafferty," the scrawny tough said wearily. "Sam Bedford went to yore store, accused you of bein' behind all his troubles, and said him and Elmer Lafferty had enough circumstantial evidence to run you out of the country, even if they couldn't get you jailed. You batted Old Man Bedford over the head with a gun, then got hold of Ike Dover and told him to nab Lafferty. You and Ike took them two senseless fellers down behind Grigg Sobey's corral fence, and told me and Boots Vinton to take their guns and shoot 'em, then leave the guns so's it'd look like they beefed each other."

"Elmer Lafferty, at least, is dead!" Walt Brady remarked. "So you've just talked your own neck into a noose!"

"Not me, Brady," Ollie Ford said bluntly. "I'd taken the pistol out of Elmer Lafferty's holster, and used it on Sam Bedford. Only I was dad-blamed careful to see that them slugs caught Old Man Bedford at a slant. If Old Bedford lives, I ain't about to get hung."

"Keep him covered, boys," Raine said to the two Boxed T cowhands holding Ollie Ford. "Link, you go ask the sawbones to come here to this room, soon as he can leave Sam Bedford. Me and Walt Brady and Ollie Ford all need a little patchin' up. But before you go, search Brady. He may have that letter of mine on him, and I'd sure as thunder like to know what Bert Mossman said to me."

"You'll never read that letter, Raine!" Walt Brady said harshly. "I burned it."

"Yeah, that's right, Raine," Ollie Ford said wearily. "Brady burnt the letter a while ago, then had me plant the envelope in Elmer Lafferty's pocket. But I seen that note before it was burned. All it said was 'Congratulations on doin' a swell job at Horseshoe Hill, Tom. When you get this out of the Wagon Gap post-office, don't get sore over the long ride. You've earned a rest, and my friend, Sheriff Sam Bedford, knows some fine huntin' and fishin' spots, down there. Take a vacation, Ranger! It was signed by yore Captain, Bert Mossman."

"Take a vacation, Ranger!" Raine snorted. "I hope to blazes the next vacation Bert Mossman offers me turns out to be a little less violent than this one did. Or maybe I'll still take that vacation. Anyhow, I'd like to look over this ranch Sam Bedford owns. Walt Brady wanted it to run as an outlaw roost and a holdin' ground for stolen stock, so it must be a pretty wild strip of country. And havin' a charmin' young lady like Grace Bedford show me around the place won't hurt my feelings a bit."

Raine glanced at Link Topley as he quit speaking. The lank young ranchman reddened and squirmed, but managed a dry grin when he saw Raine look at him.

"I'll get Doc Tinker up here for you, Tom, and sure hope you ain't hurt bad," the Boxed T owner said. "But I don't hope you a blamed bit of luck with Grace, dern you."

"I ought to leave you stewin' in your own juices for ever bein' lunkhead enough to get into a quarrel with a fine girl like Grace," Raine chuckled. "But don't worry, Link. Until the outlaw bands in Arizona Territory are smashed, I've got somethin' to do besides fall in love with some girl!"

"I'll get that sawbones up here, Tom!" Link Topley grinned hugely. "And if I was to come ridin' out to the Bedford place, sayin' I wanted to see you, don't let on to Grace that maybe I had somethin' else in mind, will you?"

Raine nodded, a faint grin on his lips as Link Topley left the room. A wife to steady him down was just what that young rooster needed, Raine thought. Marriage, and the responsibilities of a home and family, would very likely keep Link Topley from becoming a hard-case. Raine guessed it might be fun, helping Link get out of the dog-house Grace Bedford had put him in for acting like a rough-neck. And while he was doing that, he decided gravely, he could be enjoying the vacation that had almost been the death of him!

NEXT ISSUE

RANGERS LAUGH LAST

Another Navajo Raine Thriller by JACKSON COLE

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The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it

by CHUCK STANLEY

THE warm breezes were blowing across the prairies when the oldster finally decided that there was enough time for him to settle down for a couple of hours with the tenderfoot or "Greener" to consider the matter of place names in the Nebraska Territory and the area that later was to become the State of Nebraska.

"Nebraska is sure an interesting part of the Old West," the mavericker declared. "It saw folks moving out to Oregon, and down south to Santa Fe. It was one of the main routes of the railroads after the wagon trails were ground into ruts or shaved off into highways. But do you know how it happened to get its name?"

The young Arbuckle looked at the wrinkled face of the old timer, watched while the aged ranch hand stoked up his smoky pipe, then said:

"I think I do. It was another case where difficulty with a foreign language gave it a name that seems quite familiar to us today. Two Frenchmen called Mallet, who were brothers, traveled up the Missouri River. They journeyed overland to what is now the Platte River. They asked the Indians the name of the broad, shallow river and the aborigines said that it was the Ni-Bthaska, which was the combination of the two Indian words meaning flat river.

"A good-natured Indian tried to translate the Indian name into its French equivalent and it finally came into English not as the Flat River, but as the Platte River, and that is the name by which it is called today. The name Ni-Bthaska survived among the Indians and they told subsequent explorers the name of the river and these frontiersmen mistook it for the name of the whole surrounding area."

Fremont's Campaign

"Keno," laughed the mossyhorn, puffing around the stem of his pipe. "You've got it pretty well hogtied. John Charles Fremont was the boy who tried to do something about correcting the mistake the Mallet brothers had made. During the early Eighteen Hundreds he insisted on calling the Platte River the Nebraska River. Folks who were familiar with the rough-tough old explorers knew what he was writing about, but so many people kept referring to it as the Platte that Fremont was finally forced to give up his campaign, although as we know, he did win out in naming Utah and Nevada."

The younker chuckled, then remarked:

"According to the information I've been able to dig up, Fremont's insistence that the river be called the Nebraska was actually responsible for giving the State that name. Some of the State's officials wanted to call it Platte Territory after the main river in the region, but this was considered as anything but pleasing or inspiring, so Fremont's insistence that the river should have the English variation of the Indian name resulted in the selection of the name. There is on record in Washington, a report of the Secretary of War written in 1844 when Fremont returned to Washington which states that since the Platte or Nebraska River is the central stream leading through

Our "Greener" Learns Place-Names of Nebraska!

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the great south pass, it should properly furnish the name for the territory."

Other Nebraska Names

"You've got something there," the mossy-horn declared. "It's the same as the situation in Oregon. One time the Columbia River was known as the Oregon River. Folks didn't want to call the state Columbia, but they were willing to use the old name of the river. But now let's look at some of the other names in Nebraska that were tacked onto it by the cowboys, buffalo hunters, pioneers and frontiersmen."

The old-timer was settled down comfortably and he began to run off some of the Nebraska place names that particularly appealed to him. These included Weeping Water Creek, Bone Creek, Sowbelly Canyon, Rawhide Creek, Saddle Butte, Broken Bow and Trunk Butte. The Greener tried to form his own opinions about the names, and some of them were fairly close, but others were a bit more interesting.

Some folks explained Weeping Water Creek by telling a story of how an Indian girl was kidnaped by a rejected suitor while she was bathing in the creek. In the fight that followed, all of her father's relatives were killed, and the women were presumed to have filled the creek with their tears. Most folks figured that there must have been a good deal of water in the creek beforehand, otherwise the Indian girl couldn't have gone bathing.

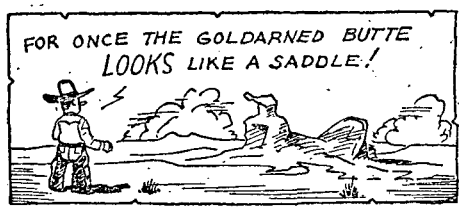
The real explanation is that again the white settlers misinterpreted an Indian word meaning "rustle" for the word meaning "weep." So the real name of the creek should be "Rustling Water Creek," after the sound it made as it flowed over the stones and through the undergrowth.

Bone Creek earned its name from the thousands of buffalo and cattle skeletons that bleached and rested along its banks. Sowbelly Canyon earned its name in a much more romantic fashion. It was given to the canyon by a party of cowboys and frontiersmen who came to the aid of a squadron of cavalry which was surrounded by the Indians and almost out of rations. The rescue party succored the starving soldiers with sowbelly and beans which is a good cowboy standby.

A Grim Episode

The name given to Rawhide Creek also recalled a rather grim episode with the Indians. The man responsible for the name was one of those braggarts so common among some of the wagon trains, who boasted that he was going to kill the first Indian he saw and skin him alive. The Indian was killed, all right, but his companions captured the white killer, tied him to a tree and did a bit of skinning of their own. Hence the name.

Saddle Butte was one of the more common designations given to mountains by the bulltrain drivers and the men who rode or walked beside the wagon trains. When a



Butte resembled a horse's saddle, that was the name it was given, and the name stuck. Broken Bow was a reminiscence of a custom of the Indians who invariably buried an Indian brave's weapons with him when he died a natural death or was killed in battle. The defeated warrior usually had to put up with a broken bow.

The name of Trunk Butte also recalled the simple comparison of a rocky upthrust with one of the homely objects in the everyday life of a settler moving West with all of his goods and chattels in his Conestoga.

The Larger Towns

"How about looking over some of the larger towns, and figuring out how they got their names?" suggested the tenderfoot.

"Okay," agreed the oldster. "There's about eight really big cities in Nebraska, and each one of them has plenty of interest connected with its naming. There's Omaha, Norfolk, Lincoln, Fremont, Grand Island, North Platte, Hastings and Beatrice. Do you have any idea how any of those were named?"

"Sure thing," replied the greener as he poised his pencil over his notebook. "Omaha was named after the Omaha Indians. Back in June 1854 a treaty was signed by which the Indians gave up their lands along the stretch of the Missouri where the city now stands. The Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company got hold of the town-site and by the following September maps had been printed and Omaha City was on its ways to becoming a Nebraska metropolis."

The mossy-horn agreed with this, then

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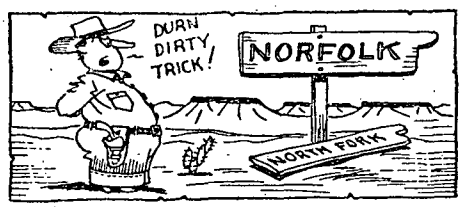
leaned back in his rawhide backed chair, looked up at the ceiling of his cabin as though the pageant of the past in Nebraska was moving along on the rough timbers and then he explained how Norfolk got its name.

The city on the north fork of the Elkhorn River was settled in 1866 by a group of German farmers from Wisconsin. They arrived in ox-drawn prairie schooners and surveyed their ground with a compass and cords from a bed. The original intention was



to name the settlement North Fork, because it was close to the north fork of the Elkhorn River. However when the name arrived in Washington, the Post Office Department shortened it to Norfolk.

The name was accepted by the settlers although they were quite angry about it for a while.

The Name of Lincoln

"I don't blame them," broke in the younker as he jotted down this interesting information. "I reckon we don't have too much trouble deciding that Lincoln, Nebraska, was named after the president of Civil War days."

"That's a pretty easy decision," the oldster agreed, "but the story of how it received the name is one you might like to know. Lincoln probably has more different water courses flowing through its limits than any other place of its size. It completely fills the shallow basin that is the course of Salt Creek, Rock Creek, Stevens Creek, Antelope Creek, Middle Creek and Oak Creek. It is one of the few places in the Nebraska country that is entirely free of tornadoes.

"The basin was surveyed in 1856, and the first settler was named John Prey, who took up his residence on Salt Creek. Three years later there were a number of other settlers, and they met under the Conference Elm to decide on the name of their county seat. It was called Lancaster, because some of the settlers wanted to commemorate their old home town, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

"On July 4th, 1863, a Methodist colony was established there. A little later a group from up New England way started a village which they called Yankee Hill. In 1867 Lancaster was chosen as the new state capital. Omaha had been the capital since 1854, and when the plans were made to move the seat of government to Lancaster, Senator Patrick of Omaha recommended that the name be changed to Lincoln, in honor of the martyred president, and this action was approved."

In Honor of Fremont

"Since John C. Fremont was responsible for naming so many of the cities, lakes, rivers and other spots in the West, it was only right that they should name a place after him," the greenhorn declared as he

filed the information about the State capital. "Was he around when the name was fastened onto the town?"

"Oh, certainly," replied the mavericker. "The name was first suggested in 1856 by the Fremont Town Association in honor of General Fremont who was then running for president of the United States."

Grand Island, Nebraska, was one of those communities that owed much of its importance to the building of the Union Pacific Railroad. The elements in the settlement and naming of the city were discussed by the old range mentor and his young satellite.

Between puffs on his pipe, the oldster pointed out that the town took its name from an older community south of the Platte River which was opposite a large island in the river, and was called La Grande Ile or the French equivalent of Grand Island. The French-Canadians didn't object to the theft of the name, because the conservative railroad builders also moved the buildings from the older town up to their new location.

The town was settled by the Germans in 1857 and 1858, but in 1859 a prairie fire started by a disgruntled gold-seeker wiped out the community and left but a single house standing. People in Omaha collected enough money to rebuild the settlement.

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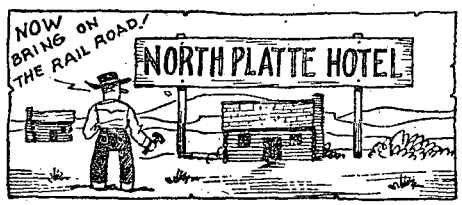
Discussion of the next name showed that North Platte was one of those communities that started out as a railroad construction town, but was destined for a more permanent life. When the Union Pacific Railroad started building through Nebraska in the 1860s, many businessmen and land sharks tried to anticipate where the railroad construction towns would be built.

Two of these men, one of them named Peniston and the other named Andrew J. Miller had a trading post at Cold Water, Nebraska. They learned that North Platte was going to be a division point on the railroad, so they moved their store over to the construction camp.

General Grenville M. Dodge laid out the town site for the Union Pacific Railroad. The second building was a log cabin brought from Cottonwood Springs by John Burke



who opened it up as the first hotel in North Platte. Within a few months there were more than three hundred buildings in North Platte. The present city was incorporated in 1871. North Platte was identified with many interesting Western characters, but outstanding among these was Buffalo Bill Cody. His ranch was close to the city.

A Good English Name

Interest among the two researchers drifted then to Hastings, and the Arbuckle was curious about the name attached to this town. The mossyhorn knocked the dottle out of his pipe, laid it aside while he crumpled some tobacco in his hand and then asked: "What kind of a name would you call Hastings?"

"It sounds like a good English name," the pilgrim declared. "That was the name of the place where Harold of England fought against the invaders."

"You're sure right there," the wrinkled cowhand declared. "Back in 1870 a group of Englishmen heard about the fertile country out there in Nebraska, and they decided to pack their carpet bags and head for Nebraska. They took up homesteads in the vicinity of where Hastings now stands. The lucky hombre in the bunch was Walter Micklen, because the town site of Hastings was laid out on his property in 1872."

"Didn't that have something to do with the railroads, too?" inquired the young tenderfoot.

"Some," agreed the oldster. "The town was the western terminus of the St. Joseph and Denver Railroad. I guess they ran out of ambition or money before they ever got near Denver. There's some folks connected with the railroad company who even claim that Hastings, England, had nothing to do with naming the town, that it was actually named after the section foreman on the railroad who graded the last stretch of the railroad into the little village. So you can take your pick."

An Up-and-Coming City

"I guess the Englishmen didn't argue too much, so long as they had their familiar name," chuckled the younker. "But that leaves us Beatrice of the eight towns we were going to consider. How did the place get a name like that?"

"Beatrice is a right up-and-coming city," the mavericker declared. "It got its name from a gal by the name of Beatrice Kinney, who only saw the place mebbe once or twice. Her pappy was Judge John Kinney, one of the founders of the place. He was president of the Nebraska Association which was formed to establish a settlement in the state in April 1857. They picked the spot on the banks of the Blue River, because they figured it had first rate water and timber. Beatrice Kinney came over from Nebraska City with her father on July 4th, 1857, and dedicated the town with some of her own original poetry. A good many folks in the West learned about the great open spaces at Beatrice."

"How was that?" inquired the pilgrim.

"Well," explained the old-timer, "one of the largest United States Land Offices in the country was at Beatrice, Nebraska, and in a period of twenty years more than a million acres of land in the West were opened up to homesteaders through this office."

"Golly," remarked the Arbuckle in amazement. "But weren't there other cities in Nebraska besides Omaha which were named after the Indians?"

"Quite a few of them," declared the old timer, "and there are a lot of places that were named after war heroes, presidents and important citizens. But I reckon we'll

(Continued on Page 91)

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Sheriff Shay proves that there are times when a man's never too old to be an outright fool

Shay and Braden rode up with pistols drawn

Strangers in Town

By TEX HOLT

SHERIFF BERT SHAY leaned back in his desk chair and looked severely at his deputy. "Trouble with you is you have no sense of responsibility," Shay said. "You haven't the proper respect for the majesty of the Law. In fact you are too young for the job."

"The speech is familiar but the face is different," Ernie Braden said with a smile. "What's the matter, Bert? Matt Abbey been talkin' again?"

"Not again—still!" The sheriff ran his fingers through his thick blond hair. As he sat there he looked like a tophand in any good cow outfit, and he had been until he was elected sheriff six months ago. "Abbey has never stopped talkin' about us both being too young for the job since I took office and picked you as my deputy, Ernie."

"You know, sometimes I think that old hombre doesn't like us," Braden said. "Just because Abbey owns the Flying A and has been around this part of the country ever since before we were born, he figgers he rules the roost." The deputy was dark and lean, and both lawmen were in their late twenties. "He's no eagle, far as I'm concerned."

"He makes enough noise for a whole flock of eagles," Shay said. "According to him what this thriving town called Rattler Gulch and the surrounding territory needs is mature lawmen with get-up and go."

"All right," said Braden. "I'll get up—but where are we goin'?"

The sheriff didn't bother to answer that one. There were times when Ernie Braden's sense of humor reminded him of a stagecoach going downhill with the brakes broken and the horses running

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away. It was hard to say what would happen next, but something usually did.

"I'm lookin' for Sheriff Shay," said a deep voice from the open doorway of the office. "Reckon you boys must be a couple of his deputies."

A DARK-HAIRED, middle-aged man with a thin black mustache stood there. He was dressed in range clothes that carried a lot of travel dust, but there was no dust on the gun in his holster.

"You're smart, mister," Braden said before the sheriff could speak. "The sheriff is down the street at the barber shop gettin' his beard trimmed. He's been wearin' it down to his knees, and then somebody asked him whether he kept the beard inside or outside the covers when he slept."

"Which was it?" asked the stranger.

"Don't know," said the deputy sadly. "For the past week the sheriff has stayed awake all night tryin' to find out, but he never did. So he decided to have that beard cut off short. Just couldn't stand the strain any longer."

"Happens I'm the sheriff, mister," Shay said. "Don't mind my deputy, never can tell what will happen when he opens his mouth. He swallowed a hornet once. Is there something I can do?"

"So yuh're the sheriff." The stranger stepped into the office and moved closer to the desk. He stared at the star pinned on Shay's shirt. "Hump! Stack Holden is my name." He reached into a pocket and drew out a badge. "U. S. deputy marshal."

"U. S. deputy-marshal," said Braden. "Now ain't that somethin'."

"Workin' undercover," Holden said importantly. "That's why I'm not wearin' my badge. I'm trailin' a hombre who is wanted for bank robbery and murder."

"What's his name?" the sheriff asked.

"Vic Jackson," Holden said. "Has a gray mustache and gray hair. Looks like an old time cattleman, but he is shore dangerous. You seen a jasper like that around town, Sheriff?"

"Not that I recollect." Shay frowned. "You say Jackson is wanted for bank robbery. Say, is he the feller who robbed the Festival Bank a week ago and killed the cashier?"

"That's right," Holden nodded. "I figger he will land in this town before long. I aim to stick around and be here when he arrives." He moved to the door. "Guess I'll see if Hank Smithers can find me a room at the hotel. Keep on a lookout for Jackson, boys."

"I don't like the way he said 'boys'," Braden said after Holden had departed. "Sounded like he also figgers we are too young for the job, Bert."

The sheriff was looking through a desk drawer. He drew out a notice that had been sent to all the lawmen in that part of Texas from the sheriff at Festival regarding the bank robbery there.

"Listen to this, Ernie," Shay said as he read. "The lone bandit was completely disguised by a black hood which covered his entire head and he wore a long black slicker that prevented his clothes from being identified."

"I see what you mean," said the deputy. "And yet Holden knows the bank robber was Vic Jackson—was able to give us a good description of the man. Wonder how Holden learned all that?"

"I don't know," said Shay. "I'm also wonderin' what became of Bill Small, the U. S. deputy marshal who usually works in this district. Haven't seen him in over two weeks."

"Why, Sheriff!" Braden looked at Shay with a twinkle in his eye. "You sound as if you doubt the honesty of yore fellow lawmen. Could be that you think our friend Holden is lying?"

"Could be," said the sheriff with a grin as he rose to his feet. "Trouble with us young fellers is that we just don't have a trustin' nature."

He frowned and reached for his gun as he glanced at the open window on the side of the office. Braden caught the direction of the sheriff's gaze and stepped silently out the front door. These two worked well as a team and when necessary they worked fast.

The sheriff went to the window and peered out, but the man he had seen was gone. In a few moments Braden returned from the rear of the alley between the office and the harness maker's shop next door.

"No sign of anyone," Braden said from outside the window. "Shore you saw someone, Bert?"

"Positive," Shay said from the window. "And it looked like the description Holden gave us of Vic Jackson."

"Vic Jackson, eh?" The deputy moved restlessly.

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A knife thrown from the rear of the alley, wooshed through the air missed Braden's back by inches and then hit the ground with a defeated thud. The deputy swung around, hand clawing for his gun, but no one was in sight. With Colt ready, Braden raced back down the alley.

Shay climbed out through the window and dropped lightly to the ground. "Foolish move on somebody's part," he said, glancing at the knife, and then he frowned. "Or is it?"

He moved swiftly to the front end of the alley and looked up and down the street of the little cowtown. At the south end of the street, a stranger who had a white mustache, and looked a lot like an old cattleman, was heading out of town. On the plank walk in front of the Crystal Hotel Stack Holden stood smoking a cigar. He did not appear to have noticed the departing horseman.

"Mistake number two, I hope," Shay said. "And now what?"

"Just like you," Braden said from behind the sheriff. "Here I nearly get a knife in my back and you just stand around talkin' to yoreself."

"You meet more interesting people that way," Shay said. "I knew there was some reason for my saddlin' my horse and leavin' him standin' at the rail there."

"Why?" asked the deputy. "So you could talk to the horse instead of yoreself?"

"Heck, no! That stranger who looks like an old cattleman just left town ridin' a black horse," said the sheriff. "We are supposed to follow him."

"Un-huh." Braden glanced across the street. "And leave Holden here in town all by himself?" The deputy looked at the Rattler Gulch Bank further along the street. "That would never do. Holden might get lonesome or impulsive."

"Just what I thought," agreed the sheriff, stepping across the plank walk to the hitching rail where his bay was tied. "So you stick around while I take a ride."

"All right," said Braden. "But I've got an idea you'll have all the fun."

The sheriff merely nodded as he rode out of town, heading in the direction the rider on the black horse had taken. When Shay had ridden south a mile beyond the town the road wandered through a stretch of rugged country.

On Shay's right was a thicket of trees and brush, and on the left was part of Crooked Arm Creek, though at this point it was little more than a pool of dark, brackish water. Shay felt uneasy as he glanced around, for this was a made-to-order spot for drygulching.

Yet the roar of the rifle off in the brush was unexpected when it came. An invisible mallet seemed to strike the sheriff a hard blow on the head. Everything blanked out as he slid from the saddle, unconscious when he hit the ground.

The reins had dropped down so that they dragged the ground beneath the horse's head. The bay looked at his fallen rider, snorted and moved away a little distance. He had been trained to remain in one place when the reins were dragging, so he didn't go far.

The bullet that creased Shay's forehead struck just hard enough to knock him out for a moment or two. He finally opened his eyes and sat up. It was very still and he doubted whether the drygulcher had remained in the vicinity.

"Probably thinks he killed me," Shay muttered.

He touched his forehead and found there was blood on his fingers. With his neckerchief he wiped his forehead and then brushed his hand over the wound. It had stopped bleeding. He got to his feet and discovered that his hat had rolled to the edge of the pool.

SHAY walked over to pick up the hat. As he stooped down the rifle roared again. The sheriff leaped into the water and disappeared beneath the surface. Here the pool was not more than four or five feet deep. When he came up for air a moment later, one of the two guns he wore was in his left hand.

He fired as he saw a rider retreating in the distance, but the man on the black horse was too far away for accurate six-gun shooting. In a matter of seconds the horseman had disappeared.

"Huh!" said Shay disgustedly, picking up his hat out of the water and putting it on. "I get drygulched, creased and knocked out, have to jump into the water and get all wet, and my deputy worries about me havin' all the fun. What the—"

As he moved his foot struck against something soft and strange beneath the surface of the water. A few min-

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utes later Sheriff Shay had dragged the body of a man up on the bank. The corpse had been shot in the heart, the body weighted down with stones and left beneath the water.

"So that's what became of Bill Small, poor devil," Shay said, as he recognized the missing U. S. deputy marshal. "They got him."

He left the body back in the brush, planning to send a wagon from town out after it later. He decided it was useless to try and trail the man on the black horse any longer. The sheriff had a hunch that right now Rattler Gulch was the best place for him to be.

It was around three in the afternoon when he got back to his office. Ernie Braden was there waiting and the deputy looked downright unhappy.

"I shore muffed things good," Braden said. "Holden has left town and I don't even know where he went. I hung around and watched him until he went to his room in the hotel. He must have slipped out the back way and left town. What happened to you, Bert?"

The sheriff told him about the drygulching and finding the dead U. S. deputy marshal.

"The idea was for us both to trail Jackson after he threw the knife at you to convince us he was a desperate character," said Shay. "He planned to drygulch both of us when we were outside town."

"That's what I figger, too," said Braden. "Meanwhile Holden was supposed to stay in town and rob the bank while there were no lawmen around, but I kept such close watch on Holden that he decided not to try it." An idea struck the deputy. "Say, Matt Abbey got cash out of the bank for the Flying A payroll and left town a few minutes ago."

"Did Holden know that?" demanded the sheriff tersely.

"I reckon so, Abbey was doing a lot of talking about having such a big outfit that he needed a lot of cash to pay off his riders each month."

"Trust Abbey to talk too much," snorted the sheriff. "We've got to move fast, Ernie."

Shay's clothes were nearly dry, but he felt chilly so he grabbed up a vest and put it on, pinning his badge to it. Shay hurried to his horse and Braden mounted his sorrel. They rode out of town in a hurry, following a short-cut across the rangeland that would get them to the Flying A before Matt Abbey arrived.

They finally circled around a clump of trees. Ahead Shay saw Holden and Jackson covering Abbey with their guns. All three men were still in the saddle. Suddenly Holden reached out and struck the rancher a blow on the side of his head with a gun barrel.

Shay and Braden were close now, riding fast. Holden glanced back over his shoulder and saw them. He quickly wheeled his mount to face them.

"It's the two lawmen!" Holden shouted. "Get them, Jackson."

Holden fired and the deputy's gun roared at the same instant. Holden howled in pain as a bullet cut a crease in his wrist and his gun dropped out of his hand. Jackson raised his gun to fire at the sheriff, but Shay's gun was faster and Jackson caught a slug in the shoulder.

"You're both under arrest," the sheriff announced, his gun covering the two men. "And the charge is bank robbery and murder."

"What are you talkin' about?" demanded Holden. "I'm a U.S. deputy marshal."

"No, you're not," said Shay. "You killed Bill Small, the real marshal and stole his badge. Besides we caught you trying to rob Matt Abbey of his payroll money."

"That's right," Abbey said weakly, as he clung to his saddle horn to keep from falling. "And I've been kicking about the pair of you being too young for lawmen. I'm an old fool."

"You ain't so old," Braden said with a grin.

Next Issue's Headliners: HIDDEN LOOT ON THE BORDER, a Tombstone and Speedy Novelet by W. C. TUTTLE—THE HARD TRAIL, an Action Novelet by ROLLAND LYNCH—plus a Navajo Raine yarn and many others!

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As a tongue of flame lashed at Jason, both of his guns flashed up and thundered in quick succession

GUNSMOKE PARDON

By BURL TUTTLE

The old sheriff thought Red Grimes deserved a chance, but how would that go with bounty-hunting Lobo Jason?

BLUE dusk was creeping in from the floor of the desert and a faint breeze sifted down from the Rincons. The false-fronted buildings cast long shadows like ghostly fingers across the main street. A strange hush held Sacaton in its spell as "Lobo" Jason rode in and stabled his horse at the livery barn. The faint chimes of his spur chains were muted as he walked toward the blob of light that marked the town's only eating place, The Cowboy's Pride.

Jason paused in that light and peered cautiously inside in a vain attempt to see who might be in there. The glow through the windows touched his long, grim face, emphasizing the weariness that had left its mark.

As he shouldered through the door a swift glance told him that the room was empty.

A weary cook came in from the kitchen and took his order. He leaned back and closed his eyes for an instant, fighting

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off the physical exhaustion that was overtaking him. But his mind was alert. He knew that men with a bounty on their heads hounded his backtrail.

Finishing his supper, Lobo Jason stepped out onto the sidewalk where a group of silent men eyed him coolly.

"That bounty hunter would scalp his own brother—for a reward," one of the group murmured. "Probably here lookin' for Red Grimes, the killer."

Lobo Jason's craggy face turned bleakly hard as a slab of weather-beaten granite as he stopped and faced the group. Anger seethed in the heart of the bounty-hunter.

"You go to the devil!" he said to nobody in particular, then moved on.

What had he expected here—a warm welcome? On his backtrail he had marked up considerable gun-justice, doing his bounty hunting in outlaw camps. He rode dangerous trails and collected his reward over the blazing muzzles of his six-guns. He favored a bullet-scarred knee as he crossed the street. That wound had been received in a gun-ruckus on the Wichitas two months ago. With death riding stark and real beside him always, he never felt safe from bushwhack lead, fired by some vengeance-seeking outlaw.

He saw a light in Sheriff Bud Oliver's office and moved toward it. Inside, Bill Brooks, a wizened oldster who acted as jailer, sat behind the battered desk in the warm glowing light of a ceiling lamp. He glanced over the top of his spectacles and recognized Lobo Jason.

"Nope!" he said with a shake of his silvery head. "There ain't bin no killin's around here since Sheriff Bud cleaned up the town. Yo're wastin' yore time, lookin' fer bounty 'round Sacatone, Lobo."

JASON stood there with stony eyes, cold and hard under shaggy brows. "Ain't seen nothin' of Red Grimes around this country, have you?"

"Nope! Sheriff Bud went off on a fishin' trip with Ken Zert. There ain't no outlaws around town. So, I reckon you'd better drag yore rope and keep ridin', Lobo. Not many folks got much use for a bounty hunter, anyhow."

Lobo Jason never let an insult rile him. He left the office and headed for the hotel across the street. He saw a flashing streak from an alleyway. The sharp crack of a gun thundered through the canyon of the street. The bushwhacker's bullet burned a streak along Lobo's left cheek. He stepped into a wagon rut and fell to his face in the dusty street.

Two more crashes of gun-thunder rocked through the night. Crimson flame speared at Lobo Jason from the alleyway. Bullets kicked sand in his face. He came to his knees, with both guns roaring. Shod hoofs sounded, pounding through the alley racing on. Lobo got to his feet, holstering his guns.

Bill Brooks, the old jailer, ran out from the sheriff's office, swearing loudly and violently.

"Dang yore hide, Lobo, git out of this town! There's enough outlaws ridin' the vengeance trail after yore ornery hide now without bringin' trouble to a peaceful town like Sacaton! Drag yore rope and drag it fast, mister!"

Lobo Jason stood looking at the alley where the bushwhacker's lead had come from. He wondered which one of his many enemies had tried to kill him.

A crowd gathered around Jason. A tall, dandified, hard looking man, dressed in black broadcloth and a fawn-colored Stetson said pointedly:

"I've heard that you are quite a trail-eater, Jason. But it looks like Red Grimes cut your sign first this time."

Lobo gave the tall man a flinty glance. "What makes you think it was Grimes?"

The dandified man shrugged. "I saw Red Grimes ride into town an hour ago. I recognized him from an old reward dodger I saw recently. Hope you can catch him, Jason." He shoved out his hand and said, "I'm Ken Zert—friend of the sheriff."

Jason ignored the hand. When people wanted to shake hands with him it was usually not because of friendship.

"You're the gent who went fishin' with Sheriff Oliver, ain't you?"

Ken Zert withdrew his hand and nodded. "I had to come back on business. Sheriff Bud will probably be fightin' mosquitoes and working that cat-fish line at his camp at North Fork for another week." Zert smiled as he concluded, "I suppose you will catch Grimes. You are goin' after him, ain't you?"

The bounty hunter glowered at the anxious faces of the crowd gathered around him. They hated him and he knew it. They wanted him to leave town.

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Here was this gent, Ken Zert, who kept urging him to go after the outlaw. He had come to Sacaton, looking for Red Grimes, all right. There was a handsome bounty on the killer's head.

"I reckon I'll call on the sheriff out at his camp," Lobo Jason said, without committing himself or letting anybody know his business. "Fishin' ought to be good."

Ken Zert lost his smile. Lobo Jason turned toward the livery barn to get his horse. Zert followed.

"Listen," he said in a low tone, "I didn't want to say anything back there, Jason, but I've got a hunch you'll run into Red Grimes, livin' with a woman down near the river. When I left the sheriff's camp today I rode right past the place and I could swear I saw Grimes there in the yard."

Jason gave the tall one a probing look. "Thanks, Zert." And went on.

Lobo Jason saw the squatty little cabin against a background of tall cottonwoods in the darkness. Light poured from open door and windows. His horse's hoofbeats sounded hollow across the yard. He got down from the saddle and stood in the shadows, careful not to step into a trap.

"Hello in there!" he called. "Anybody home?"

A woman filled the doorway against the light. She was small, with wavy brown hair and a wistful expression. A little girl, about five years old, stood beside the woman, clinging to her apron.

"Mummy, is that Daddy come home?" the child asked. "Is it Daddy?"

"No, Louise." The woman's voice was full and rich but sounded weary. "What is it, please?" she asked Lobo Jason.

"Anybody home with you, ma'am?"

She shook her head. "Why—no!"

"You needn't be scared, ma'am. I'm Lobo Jason—a lawman, by rights. I wanted to talk to yore husband."

A GASP came from the woman. A look of fear flicked in her eyes.

"You're Lobo Jason, the bounty hunter!" she cried.

No man had come outside with the woman but Jason was cautious. He heard a twig snap in a nearby thicket. He saw a shadowy form in the moonlight. A gun thundered and a tongue of crimson lashed at Lobo Jason. Both of his guns flashed up, blazing, and the man dodged away. Hoofbeats sounded, thudding through the night. Jason turned slowly back, facing the terrified woman and the trembling child who hung tightly to her apron.

"Was that yore husband?" he asked.

"No!" she cried. "Oh, no!"

"Is Red Grimes yore husband?" Lobo persisted in a grim tone.

She nodded her head, lowering her eyes. The little girl started crying.

"You're a vicious creature, Lobo Jason!" the woman said bitterly.

"I'm the law."

His eyes were stony. He had no sympathy for followers of the owlhoot trail who rode in the shadows of honest men.

"I'm here to arrest Red Grimes," he stated slowly. "Know where I can locate him, ma'am?" He watched her expression closely.

"Daddy's got the fat old sheriff with him," the little girl, rubbing chubby fists in her tear-streaked eyes, said. "And the sheriff is mad."

"Hush, Louise!" the woman gasped, looking fearfully at Jason.

Then the woman started crying, too. She covered her face with her hands. Her slender shoulders shook with every sobbing breath.

Women were delicate creatures. Once a man got tangled up with a mess of women, he sure was hobbled, Jason figured. It gave him a creepy feeling deep down inside hearing this woman cry.

"Stop that bawlin'!" he ordered gruffly. "Where did that outlaw man of you'rn take the sheriff?"

The woman looked up, scorching fury in her eyes. A tigerish beauty crimsoned her cheeks. Her hands were talons that reached out to claw at Lobo Jason. He backed away.

She began laughing. Jason was startled. He had never seen a hysterical woman before. She pointed toward the river beyond a timbered ridge.

"Down there!" she cried. "Red's down there, doing his best to keep them from killing the sheriff. But you wouldn't believe Red Grimes would do a thing like that!" She screamed with laughter, then began scratching and clawing at Jason.

"Now, look, ma'am." Jason gave her a slap on the back.

That brought her out of it. She stopped laughing and began sobbing again. The little girl looked up at Jason.

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"My daddy likes me," she said. "And Mummy, too."

That was too much for Lobo Jason. He edged across the yard and climbed onto his horse. Back there, the woman stood, crying. Lobo Jason could face a wolf-pack over blazing guns, but here was something he could not understand. He rode on with the moon a bright disk in a star-studded sky overhead.

A short time later he found the cabin on the river bank. Dull light slashed through cracks in the walls. Jason pulled up his horse short of the river bank and looked down suspiciously at a huge crate-like cage made of wooden slats and chicken wire. He had seen fish traps before, but never one as large as this. He edged back into the willows when men came from the cabin.

He recognized Sheriff Oliver, who was being urged along by four armed men. Oliver's bald head gleamed naked and white in the moonlight. His moon-shaped face was streaked with blood. His shirt was in ribbons. He stumbled along as though he had taken a terrible beating. One of the men prodding him was Ken Zert.

Lobo Jason recognized the tall one who had been so persistent about getting him on Red Grimes' trail back at Sacaton. He wondered why but lost no time slipping from the saddle.

Jason stepped out into the clearing. "All right—turn him loose!" His voice cracked like a whip as he covered the group with his twin Colts.

"It's Lobo Jason!" Ken Zert said.

LOBO JASON was not prepared for what happened. Ken Zert shoved the sheriff forward, knocking him down. Zert and his crew ducked into the brush. Guns spat flame and bullets lashed at Jason. He, too, dropped back into the willows, hunkering low against the ground. His twin Colts thundered in reply to those outlaw bullets.

"Dang it, they're cuttin' down on me, too, Jason!" the fat sheriff bellowed.

Jason saw him. He was helpless out there in the clearing, unarmed, trying to gain his feet and make a run for it.

"Call off that bounty hunter, sheriff, and we won't kill you!" Ken Zert offered.

Jason fired at the sound of that voice. A man always gambled when he pinned on a law badge. The sheriff would have to take a chance now. The spiteful crack of guns was music across the clearing. Jason fired at every crimson flash.

Those gun-slicks peppered his position with lead that whizzed over his head like angry bees. He paused to reload his guns. In a loud voice, he called out for Ken Zert and his hellions to show themselves in the open. His challenge was answered by Zert.

"All right, Sheriff!" Zert shouted. "The next load of lead will be for you unless you call off Jason and let us make a break for it!"

The sheriff was a brave man. "You go to blazes!" he roared, sitting there in the clearing, unable to get to his feet with his hands tied behind his back.

The sheriff's words were punctuated with a hail of lead from the outlaw gang. Some of it raked the fat lawman.

"Shootin' at an unarmed man—and me with a broken ankle," the sheriff bellowed.

Lobo Jason cut down on those gun flashes.

"Kill 'em both," one of the unseen bushwhackers shouted. "Kill 'em and put 'em in the fish trap fer bait! Nobody'll ever find 'em there."

"What!" another outlaw chopped in, taunting. "Yuh mean put Lobo Jason in the fish trap—and kill every catfish in the river! Why, that pizen snake would stagnate the hull river!"

There was a momentary lull in the gun battle.

"We've got some more lead for you, Oliver, unless you call off Jason!" Ken Zert threatened from the willows.

The sheriff just grunted. Lobo Jason took advantage of the lull. He felt bound and hog-tied, with the sheriff sitting out there in the open, helpless. He changed his position, deciding he couldn't let those killers wipe out another lawman. They had the advantage in that respect. They didn't know that they could make this bounty hunter holster his guns if they cut down on the sheriff again.

"You'll jest have to hunker there and take it, sheriff!" Jason shouted. "Blamed if I'll let one of those sidewinders git loose! But if they do kill you, I swear I'll never take one of 'em to court! I'll give 'em justice on the spot!"

Lobo Jason didn't mean a word of it but a man had to bluff with everything if he bluffed at all.

"Cut yore string, Lobo, and give 'em

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blazes!" the sheriff said.

Lobo moved through the underbrush, silent as a shadow. He felt a warm glow of triumph flow through him when he realized that he had those outlaws hemmed in against the river. They would have to pass under the sights of his guns now if they made a run for it. He fired at a shadowy form and heard the renegade cry out in pain. He saw him lunge forward, then go down, dying.

"All right—you asked for it!" Zert shouted.

Guns roared, but those bullets were not meant for Lobo Jason. The bounty hunter closed in on those gun-flashes, held his own fire. He crouched low, moving through the underbrush like a stalking panther, silently. Another gun spoke and a cry of pain came from Sheriff Oliver out there in the clearing.

"Git 'em, Lobo!" Oliver cried. "Don't pay any attention to me!"

That might have been the brave sheriff's last words. Lobo knew. There came a challenging silence, then Ken Zert's voice cut through the darkness.

"All right, Lobo, I've got him centered. The next shot is for keeps. I'll kill him if you stay in the fight!"

JASON muttered a blistering oath. The killer meant just what he said. Jason slowly holstered his guns. "It's yore pot, Zert," he called through the night. "I can't let you kill the sheriff. But there'll be another hand dealt and it won't be from the bottom of the deck next time!"

He saw three shadowy figures slip through the willows, fleeing the trap he had them in. He stood there, trembling, unable to stop them now. Then the mockery of Ken Zert's laughter floated back to haunt him, and they were gone.

Jason went out to help the sheriff. Blood stained Oliver's shirt. His eyes were hard and bitter when he looked up at the bounty hunter.

"You danged soft-hearted old fool," he said. "You let 'em git away, jest to save me."

Jason recognized a warm sincerity in the lawman's tone that few men had ever wasted on him. His lips peeled back in a wolfish grin, but he was not the kind to show emotion.

"So!" he said, looking off in the direction the outlaws had gone. "There goes the fattest batch of bounty money I ever let slip through my fingers."

"You could have had it, too," the sheriff replied. "The only thing you would have had to do was to let me die."

Jason snorted. "Why, dang yore hide!" he said. "You keep on talkin' like that and I'll bait that big fish trap with yore ornery carcass. Would do it anyhow only I'm scared you'd infect the river!" He turned aside to conceal a smile. "Anyhow, I got to go get them outlaws."

He whistled and his horse came trotting from the willows. Jason helped the sheriff to his feet, and the crippled lawman gripped the saddle horn, balancing on one foot to favor his broken ankle.

"Now, I got to lend you my hoss to haul yore no-good carcass out to the doctor," Jason grumbled. "You want me to make this hoss lay down so's yuh can climb on him, fat man?"

"I'll git on," the sheriff said, smiling. "Don't act so danged tough, Lobo. Yore about the whitest danged polecat I ever seen." He chuckled. "Take me to Red Grimes' house. I've got some thanks to give that feller." Jason helped him into the saddle.

"He's the man I'm after," Jason said dryly. "Big bounty on Red's scalp."

All the good humor went out of the big sheriff. "You lay a hand on Red and I'll personally gun-whip yuh clean out of my county!" he threatened.

"It takes a mighty good man to do that, sheriff," Jason said quietly. He headed down the trail guiding the horse with the fat lawman riding. "What made you get friendly with that killer?"

The sheriff just moaned, clinging to the saddle horn, bleeding from the many wounds that covered his body. Jason hurried the horse along the trail. When he came from the brush and headed across Grimes' front yard, he saw a slender, red-headed man standing there, calmly waiting. The woman came out and stood beside her husband. Lobo Jason looked hard at the twin guns strapped around the redhead's slender middle.

"Howdy, Red Grimes," he said gruffly.

"Red" Grimes nodded. "Want to see me, Jason?"

"Reckon I do," Jason said.

The sheriff lifted his head and glowered down at Jason. "Red's tryin' to live decent, here with his wife and child," he said earnestly. "He's quit the owlhoot.

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He wasn't in on that shoot-out back there. You let Red alone, Lobo!"

"He took a shot in town and tried to kill me near this cabin," Jason said dryly. "You're a poor shot, Red."

Red Grimes crimsoned. "That must have been Zert," he said. "Zert claims you killed his brother up in Montana. He's out for revenge, hopin' to kill you some time. Did yuh kill his brother, Curley?"

Lobo Jason nodded. "Curley murdered a woman, and the law put a thousand dollar bounty on his scalp. I went after the money and he had an even break."

"Ken Zert found out that Red had followed the owlhoot trail," Sheriff Oliver cut in. "Zert forced Red to go in with him, threatening to turn him over to the law otherwise. I didn't know Red Grimes had a price on his head until he rode into town and told me that Zert and his crew had intimidated him and his wife. They intended robbing the Sacaton bank. Before I could get set for 'em, they kidnaped me, took me out of town, then passed the word 'round I had gone fishin' with Ken Zert. They didn't want no lawman on the job when they robbed the bank tomorrow. Red played along with them after they got me, hopin' to git a chance to turn me loose. They caught him tryin' and knew then he was sidin' the law. Red hightailed to town, hopin' to git help."

THE bounty hunter stared at Oliver. "That makes sense," Jason admitted. "Maybe that's why Zert wanted me to kill Red. The Governor hasn't pardoned Red yet, has he?"

Sheriff Bud Oliver shook his head. "No. Not yet, but he will."

"Then, the bounty on Red's head still holds good," Jason mused. "I don't figure on lettin' no more bounty money slide through my fingers tonight."

"Jason, stop that bounty talk," the big sheriff said, then moaned from the pain of his wounds.

Lobo Jason looked hard at Red Grimes. "You comin' along peaceful?" he asked.

"I don't fight the law any more," Red said softly, looking at his wife at his side.

Mrs. Grimes faced Jason, shaking a finger in his face. "Lobo is a good name for you!" she cried. "You're worse than most of the criminals you hound. You have no heart, no feelings. You're utterly ruthless!"

Lobo Jason looked steadily at her for a moment, then said to her husband: "We'll git the sheriff inside and try and patch him up. Then, me and you, we'll hit the trail for town, Grimes."

Red nodded. "Maybe it's best thataway. I'll go along, but you'd better let me keep my guns. Ken Zert and his friends have an ambush set for you a little ways down the trail. They didn't see me when I rode back from town. There'll be a posse from town comin' this way soon. What say let's you and me just stick right here until we hear the posse comin'. Then we'll close in from this side and the posse from the other."

Lobo Jason gave him a wolfish grin. He had seen good men go on the owlhoot, and outlaws turn honest. He knew a man when he saw one.

"How come you to drift to the owlhoot, Red?" he asked softly.

Red's face tightened. "Killed a range-hog who had a pack of political friends," he answered. "It was a fair stand-up fight, but I couldn't prove it."

Jason always liked to be downright sure of a man before he made a final decision. "I don't like to share that bounty money with no posse," he said. "I think I'll leave you here on your word of honor, Red, while I go clean up that ambush." He would soon know how Red Grimes stacked up, he told himself.

"We'll take you inside now, sheriff," Red said, ignoring Jason.

They helped the hefty lawman into the house, put him to bed and dressed his wounds. "Now we'll go bust that killer-trap," Red said softly.

Jason eyed him sternly. "I ain't makin' no promises, Red."

"I ain't askin' for none, badge man."

They went outside and got their horses and headed up the trail.

Up ahead was the ambush where a vengeful killer wanted to pay a lawman off with a bullet. Lobo Jason rode right smack into the trap, knowing it was there. The first gun spoke from a copse of brush. That bullet slapped at the bounty hunter's sleeve, whistled on. Jason's claw-like hands dipped down and his six-guns thundered. Powder-smoke stung his pinched nostrils. He hammered

(*Concluded on Page* 91)

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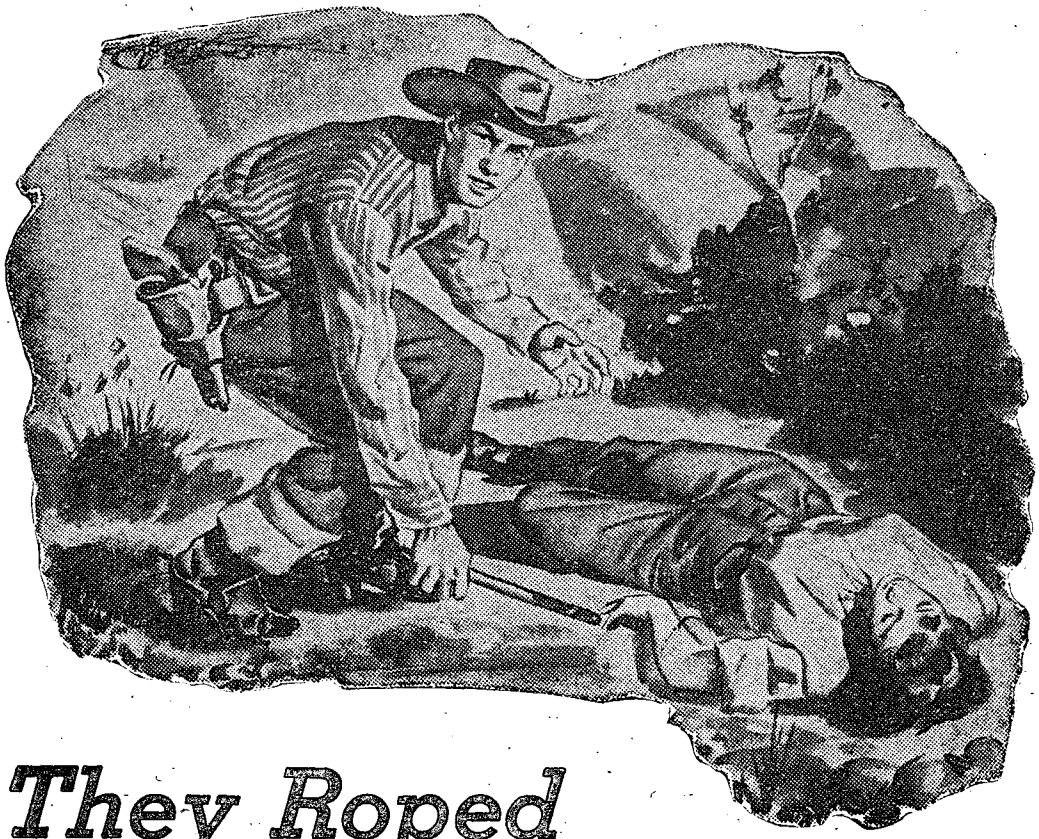
A True Crime Story by LUTHER LOCKE



They Roped a MAVERICK

The mystery murder of Lottie Peabody seemed destined to remain unsolved — but Sheriff Bill Langley cooked up a clever scheme!

THINGS looked bad for Frank Peabody. Suspected of murdering his pretty wife, the daughter of one of the wealthiest ranchers in Nevada, he stood in front of Sheriff William Langley of White Pine County, a deathly pallor on his face, his hands nervously clenching and unclenching. He was unable to offer a plausible explanation for the events of the last twelve hours.

"Why did you kill her?" the sheriff repeated, it seemed to Peabody for the hundredth time.

For the hundredth time the young rancher said: "I didn't!"

Early that morning as the sun was peeping over the eastern rim, Albert York, a neighbor of the Peabody's, had come upon Frank standing over the body of Charlotte, a bloody iron tail gate rod in his hand. He had notified the sheriff at once and Peabody

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had been taken into custody.

Peabody's story seemed to lack sincerity as well as being strange indeed. The young man said his wife had left their ranchhouse the previous evening to take a walk while he did some chores around the place before dark. When she failed to return, Peabody declared he had set out to find her. He insisted he had searched the desert all night and when dawn broke he had come upon her body at the head of a dry wash, behind a clump of sagebrush.

Peabody Denies Charge

"When I saw her there," the distraught man said, "I was so terrified I didn't know what I was doing. I saw the iron rod and recognized it as one from my wagon. I don't know how it got there. I don't know how she got there. Then I looked up and saw York who had just ridden up and was dismounting. I didn't do it." His voice trailed off to a whisper. He seemed on the verge of collapse.

To make matters worse, Sheriff Langley had learned that Peabody had, the day before, visited Ely where he had spent some time with a young woman, known as Kitty, who was a waitress in a restaurant. Kitty and Peabody had been friendly before his marriage to Charlotte Kennicot, as everyone knew.

Worn by the long questioning of the man, Langley shrugged and with a wave of his hand said:

"Lock him up. Maybe a few days in jail will help him remember what happened."

Sheriff Questions Kitty

Later the same day the sheriff paid a visit to Kitty. The young woman refused to admit any affair with Peabody.

"Frank just came in here for his lunch," she said. "He talked to me like he always does when he's in town, then went away and I didn't see him again." The sheriff stared at her and she stared back defiantly.

"Why don't you ask Al York about it?" she taunted, as Langley started for the door. "I hear he was sweet on Mrs. Peabody and he was in town yesterday, too."

"What about York?" the lawman asked, turning back to the counter behind which the girl stood. "What do you know about this?"

Kitty grinned insolently. "Oh, nothing much, except that he was telling me what a swell looker Lottie was. Then, when he tried to make a date with me and I laughed at him, he said he was just kidding me anyway because he was going to see a prettier girl than me. Maybe it was the beautiful Mrs. Peabody."

Satisfied he could get nothing more out of the waitress and realizing he had nothing on her, the sheriff returned to his office, wondering what sort of mystery he had run into. It did seem odd to him that both Peabody and York should have arrived at the scene of the murder at almost the same time, at dawn. York said he was on his way to the land office in Ely where he had a report to make on his homestead claim. He had started early because he wanted to get back home as quickly as possible as he planned to go out searching for strays that had wandered from his herd.

Langley was meditating over the mystery when the murdered woman's father called to see him. Cyrus Kennicot was admitted at once. Shocked at what had happened to his daughter, the old rancher lost no time making known to the sheriff why he had come.

That Girl in Ely

"I don't know whether what I am about to tell you has any bearing on this case," he began, "but we thought you should know about it. About a month ago, Lottie was visiting me and I noticed she seemed to be unhappy. When I asked her about it, she laughed and said it was nothing. But finally I got it out of her that she and Frank had been quarreling. She wouldn't tell me what it was about, but I know women and I was suspicious at the time Peabody may have been seeing too much of that girl in Ely."

The sheriff thanked his visitor for the information and as soon as Kennicot departed, started out to inquire of their friends whether there ever had been any trouble between the Peabodys.

No one in Ely he could find could supply any valuable information on that subject. The couple were well thought of and both attended the local church regularly. They seemed happily married as far as anyone knew.

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Eventually, though, Langley found a neighboring rancher who said he had gone to the Peabody ranch one morning to return something he had borrowed. When he dismounted and walked to the house, he overheard Lottie and Frank arguing in loud voices.

He said he listened a moment before making his presence known and heard the woman berating her husband and during the argument, the woman mentioned the name "Kitty." Then, before his presence was discovered, Frank retaliated with something the eavesdropper understood to indicate the husband was accusing his wife of being too friendly with an "Al." When the couple noticed him, they seemed embarrassed.

Langley decided he would go to the Peabody homestead first and have a look around. He discovered the place unlocked and went in, careful not to disturb anything. He found no evidence of a struggle, everything being in order.

A Cup of Coffee

In the kitchen things were as the woman must have left them the night she disappeared, except for a pot of coffee, and a half-filled cup on the table. The single cup indicated to the sheriff that someone had prepared it that morning or during the night. Yet Peabody had said he spent the entire night searching for his wife, and York had come upon the man at sunup miles from home.

The sheriff was about to leave when he turned and walked back to the kitchen stove. It was cold. He didn't know why, but suddenly he lifted one of the lids and looked into the fire box. He saw the usual ashes and a few charred, half-burned sticks of wood. Then he noticed something else and reached in and pulled out a piece of green cloth. Close examination disclosed it to be the remains of a man's shirt, small indeed, but certainly it had been a shirt for there was the collar band and a little of the front that still bore a blackened button.

Baffling Questions

Obviously there had been a fire in that stove since Lottie disappeared from her home. If that green shirt had been burned the day before, while she was cooking, it certainly would have been consumed. He asked himself why someone else might have burned the shirt after the woman disappeared? Had Peabody burned one of his shirts during the night? Why? Had it been bloodstained?

Returning to the jail, Langley ordered a deputy to bring Peabody to his office. He asked the same questions put to the man earlier, then, casually:

"By the way, Frank, where's that green shirt you were wearing around yesterday when you were in Ely."

It was a long shot in the dark, but the sheriff took a chance of surprising the young man into trapping himself.

When Peabody hesitated, Langley said: "You were wearing one weren't you?"

"Well, yes, I did wear a green shirt when I went to town, but I took it off after I returned home."

"And burned it up, eh?"

The man seemed momentarily confused. Then he laughed hollowly. "The fact is, Sheriff, I started to grease some wagon wheels before I took it off and got it all smeared up. When I went in the house I found it was so badly soiled that I just stuck it in the stove. Lottie was there and asked me why I had burned it up."

"Did you have your supper after that?" asked Langley.

"Oh, sure," the fellow replied.

"Have any breakfast this morning before you found Lottie's body?"

"Well, not exactly breakfast. But along about three o'clock I went back to the house to see if maybe Lottie had come home. It was cold on the desert, so I made myself a pot of coffee."

It was late and Langley said no more, preferring to let Peabody think things over another twelve hours. But the next morning he went to York's ranch where he found the man mending a corral fence."

"Mornin' Sheriff," York greeted him. "Anything new?"

York Contradicts Himself

"Nope," Langley replied. "Just thought I'd ride over and ask a few questions."

"Fire away," York invited.

An hour later Sheriff Langley had heard enough to tell York he would have to take him to jail on suspicion of murder. The rancher had admitted being friendly with Lottie Peabody. Then in what seemed to the sheriff a crude at-

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tempt to pin the slaying on the woman's husband, he had become so confused in his contradicting statements, he had turned grave suspicion on himself. The man protested his innocence but finally went with the sheriff without further protest.

York had given Langley almost too pat an alibi of his whereabouts during the hours the murder must have been committed, and he further had learned at the land office in Ely that York not only had not been there for weeks but also that he was not due to make his report for another three months.

Two weeks passed during which Langley worked long hours questioning people who knew the suspects, and digging into their pasts.

Meanwhile both Peabody and York had obtained the services of lawyers and were demanding either indictment or release. Eventually the grand jury convened and after hearing the evidence Langley had amassed, refused to indict either man for the crime.

Sheriff Langley was chagrined when he was forced to turn York and Peabody loose.

"Well men," he said, "maybe I made a mistake but that's not the end of it."

Suspects Are Freed

Peabody and York returned to their ranches and were rarely seen thereafter in Ely or neighboring ranches except when it was necessary for them to go to town for supplies. There was gossip for a time and some people wondered if Peabody would take up with Kitty. But no one ever saw them talking, much less together, and as the months passed the talk stopped and the murder of Charlotte Peabody was almost forgotten.

More than a year later, citizens of Ely and neighboring ranches became interested in a new family that had filed on a section of land, constructed a house and other buildings and moved in. Their names were Franklin. New families in that rough country in those days always were the subject of much speculation but the Franklins came in for more than their share of comment largely because in addition to the man, Bill, there were two lovely young women, Helen, about 20, and Ruth, a few years older. Even before the newcomers were settled in their new home, it became known the girls were sisters of Bill Franklin.

Helen, vivacious and blond, was the prettier of the two, and it was not long before the young unmarried men in the vicinity became more than casually interested.

Among the first to become acquainted with the Franklins was Frank Peabody. A year having passed since the death of his wife, he was once more seen frequently in the small towns and in the saloons and gambling halls. The Franklins hardly had set up their establishment when he rode up to the temporary shack they occupied as a home and introducing himself, offered to be of any assistance possible.

Bill Franklin talked with him a few minutes, thanked him and as Peabody was about to ride away, Helen appeared. Her brother introduced her.

"Howdy, ma'm," Peabody said, doffing his sombrero. "It sure is nice to have you people join us here in the desert."

The young woman smiled, thanked him and after asking her brother a question, went away.

Helen Attracts Peabody

As Frank Peabody rode back to his ranch, his thoughts were only of this lovely girl he just had met and he determined to see more of her. Thereafter he made it a point each day to ride out in the desert in the direction of the Franklin ranch.

On one occasion he met Bill, who had bought a few head of cattle and was looking around for the best grazing range on his land. For a while Peabody rode with him, offering advice and pointing out many peculiarities of the country. As they separated, Peabody inquired in a friendly way for Miss Helen.

A week later while on one of these excursions, Peabody saw a rider in the distance and suspecting it might be the girl, put spurs to his cowpony and presently was beside the girl.

"Mornin', Miss Franklin," he greeted her.

The girl returned his friendly smile and when Frank asked if he might ride with her, she said yes.

That was the first of many such meetings in the desert between Helen

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Franklin and Frank Peabody that followed as the weeks passed. Each day the romantic urge increased in the man and soon they were more than merely friendly. The girl, too, seemed to look forward to meeting Frank. They talked about many things and rode in a gay mood together many miles over the range, far from their respective homesteads.

One day, hot and tired as they turned homeward, they stopped at the head of a dry wash where there was a spring to water and rest their weary horses. Frank said they would dismount and he would loosen the saddle girths for a few minutes. Off his own pony first, he turned to assist the girl to the ground and as she slid from the saddle he found her suddenly in his arms.

Peabody Reveals Love

Frank never knew how it happened, but the next thing he remembered he was holding her close and kissing her.

"I love you, Helen," was all he could think of to say at that moment, but an instant later when she looked up into his eyes and he saw her's were shining, he stammered: "Will you marry me?"

The girl had been passive at first but now she gently pushed him away. He could see there were tears in her eyes as she started toward her horse.

"Helen!" he called. "Helen, what's the matter, dear?"

She was silent as he held her small, booted foot to help her mount and as they rode homeward, she had little to say, appearing to be in a reverie.

Then as the ranch buildings loomed ahead in the purple haze, she turned to him. "Frank, you asked me a question a while ago. I wish I could tell you just how I feel, but it's impossible. I would like to marry you, but I can't. I can never marry anyone."

The Shadow of Death

Tears came to her eyes again and she turned her head away.

"Why, Helen?" he asked, his own emotions turbulent within him.

She was silent again, then as they neared her home, she said: "I may as

[*Turn page*]

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well tell you, Frank, and then we must never see each other again. I know your story. People have told me how your wife was murdered and that you were suspected. But they never could prove anything, and anyway, I never could believe you would do such a thing. But with me it's different."

There was a brief moment of hesitation while the man waited breathlessly. Then:

"I killed a man!"

Frank Peabody was speechless as he looked into this girl's terror-filled eyes. His thoughts were a riot. But she was speaking again.

"I escaped and no one ever knew except my brother and sister. They brought me west because they thought I would be safe here. But some day the truth might be found out and then they would find me and arrest me and I don't know what would happen. Don't you see why I can't marry? I never could bring a thing like that on my husband and perhaps my children."

They were near the corral now and as they pulled up their mounts, she spoke again. "You are the only other person that knows. You will always keep my secret? Promise?"

Before he knew what had happened, she had ridden close and leaned over and kissed him.

"Good-by, Frank!"

She was gone in a cloud of dust and a moment later had disappeared behind one of the buildings.

Frank Peabody was tempted to follow and when he found her take her in his arms and promise to love and protect her always, but he thought it would be better to wait until they rode again when they could be alone in the vastness of the desert. So he turned homeward, and as he rode his thoughts were of those terrible weeks when Lottie had been murdered and he had been accused.

In the Same Boat

What if she did kill a man? Probably he deserved it, and anyway she was little worse off than was he. True, he never had been indicted for that old crime, but that didn't mean old Sheriff Langley, who never had been friendly since, wouldn't try sometime to pin the crime on him again. After all, weren't they both in something of the same boat?

The next day Frank rode to the trysting place where he and Helen had met so many times, but she did not appear. He was disappointed, but thought little of it, realizing the girl had been emotionally upset and might not appear for a few days. But when two weeks passed and he still had not seen her he was worried and troubled.

One afternoon Peabody was far afield in the desert rounding up strays, when he headed into a small canyon. Half-way up, he saw two riders ahead, one he thought to be a woman. Leaving his pony behind a clump of sagebrush, he went afoot, skirting the side of the canyon and climbing toward the rim, fifty feet above. Soon he was looking down on a scene that sent a chill of fury through his body.

Blind Jealousy

There on a grassy plot not more than 25 feet below and directly underneath the place where he was concealed, he saw Al York sitting with his back against a scrub-oak and Helen lying on the ground, her head in his lap. At first he could not hear what they were saying, but they were laughing. Presently he heard Helen say:

"You know I love you, Al, but I could only marry you on one condition. . . ."

Frank did not wait to hear more. Blind with jealousy he slid away retracing his steps down the side of the canyon, being careful not to loosen rocks that might give away his presence. So she loved Al, the man who had interfered with his own happiness once before.

She mentioned one condition on which she would marry York, but there was nothing of that kind said when he asked for her hand. His mind raced in a whirlwind of hate of both of them. He wondered how long she had been meeting York.

When he reached his ranch, Peabody had determined never to see Helen again and to forget their brief affair. He set to work harder than ever and tried to put out of his mind all that had happened since Helen had

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come to the desert.

A week later Peabody was preparing to retire one night when there came a knock on his door. When he answered, there stood Sheriff Langley and a deputy.

"Howdy, Frank," the sheriff said.

Wondering what this call was about, Peabody asked the men in.

"Can't do it now," the lawman replied. "Just came over to pick you up and take you along with us. Hurry and get your coat, it's chilly out tonight."

Alarmed and thinking Langley had some new information about the death of Lottie, Peabody started to ask questions, but was silenced by the sheriff.

"Just come along and keep quiet," was all he would say.

A hundred yards from Peabody's house, they found a group of six other men awaiting them. Peabody knew one or two of them but the others were strangers. Quickly they mounted their horses after Frank had saddled his pony and following the sheriff, set out at a brisk canter across the desert.

Frank Peabody's thoughts were in a turmoil. What was this night-time call about? Why were they taking him away with them? Did they think he had murdered Lottie after all and when the law failed to act, had taken matters into their own hands and decided to string him up? Terror struck at his heart.

Langley Gives Orders

Soon the party slowed down and the sheriff spoke quietly.

"We'll ride single file, men, from here on. I'll give the word when to stop, then everyone dismount and follow me. Don't speak or make any sound."

Presently they got the signal and dismounted.

They walked silently for half a mile and Frank Peabody knew now they were approaching the ranchhouse of Bill Franklin and his sisters. He wondered if Langley had found out about Helen. But why had they brought him along. He had nothing to do with *that* murder.

Before he knew it, the men had surrounded the Franklin home. There was

[*Turn page*]

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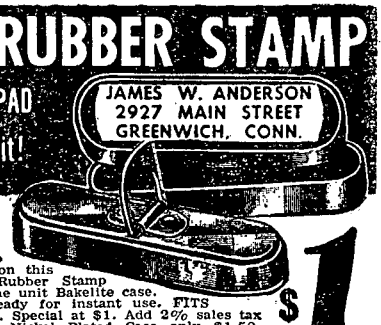

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a light in one of the windows and Langley, motioning to Peabody to follow him, crept up close. The other men stood near other windows and doors. Suddenly Peabody heard a familiar voice inside the house, the sound coming through the open window under which he, the sheriff and two other men stood. It was Helen and she was speaking to a man.

"Now tell my brother and sister what you told me, Al," she was saying. There was a moment's silence, then the sound of Al York's voice drifted out to the listeners.

"Well," he said, "I asked Helen to marry me and she said she couldn't. When I asked her why, she said it was because she once had killed a man and she never would let her husband and maybe her children in for such a thing."

The man hesitated, as if pondering deeply his next words. The girl prompted him. "Go on," she said.

"So I told her she was no worse off than I was, that we were both in the same kind of a pickle, and that I once had killed a person, so she wouldn't be getting me in anything that I might not get her in. She said she believed me, but that I would have to tell the story to you, Bill, and to Ruth, so you all would have something on me."

Under Arrest

Another voice inside the room broke the tomblike stillness that followed York's statement.

"Who was it you killed, Al?" It was Bill Franklin who spoke.

It was a moment filled with tenseness, with impending drama, as the men outside waited. Then Al York spoke again, his voice low, almost a whisper.

"Lottie Peabody!" York said.

Seconds later Sheriff Langley, followed by two deputies, Peabody, the banker in Ely and the others in the party, stepped into the room. Strong hands had grabbed York before he knew what had happened.

"You are under arrest for murder," Langley said quietly.

Frank Peabody still could not understand what had happened and why until Helen Franklin, observing him standing there in stunned amazement, came to him.

"I'm sorry, Frank, dear," she said, "but you see my 'brother and sister' and I are really operatives of a San Francisco private detective agency. We were hired by Sheriff Langley and Mr. Kennicot to come here and try and solve the murder of your wife, Lottie.

"We decided it was either you or York and that I was to pose at the first opportunity as a murderess and try to get whichever one of you was guilty to confess to me, after hearing my story. I would agree to marry one of you if we were both in the same fix. When you asked me to marry you that day in the desert and I told you I had killed a man, I knew by the shocked and hurt look on your face you were innocent. So then I went after York."

Helen Tells of Ruse

The girl stopped and smiled.

"It really was very easy once I was on the trail of the real criminal. York proposed to me and I told him the same story I told you. When he heard it, he merely laughed and said that was nothing because he had killed someone also. But he wouldn't tell me who. Then I told him there could be no marriage unless he told the story to my brother and sister and said whom he had killed because he might deny it some day and then he would have something on me I didn't have on him.

"When he finally agreed, we arranged this party so Sheriff Langley and all these witnesses could hear his confession too."

Realizing that he was trapped, and that he was a roped and branded maverick, York signed a confession. He said he had tried to make love to Lottie Peabody and when she rebuffed him, he waited until he caught her alone on one of her evening walks, attacked and killed her and then took her body far into the desert. He had used the piece of iron from Frank Peabody's wagon hoping it would cast suspicion on him.

York was brought to trial, convicted and hanged for the crime in January, 1897.

Coming in the Next Issue: CASE OF THE PRAYING CORPSE, by Luther Locke

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GUNSMOKE PARDON

(Continued from Page 82)

lead at the bushwhackers and sent his horse charging into the brush.

Those startled ambushers leaped to their feet and darted for their own horses. Lobo dropped a man in his stride with a shot from the hip. Death lashed again from the muzzles of his guns. Another man fell on his face. Spears of flame reached up for Jason. A bullet hammered through his right shoulder. He slumped forward, grasping at the saddle horn.

His senses whirled. Through glazed eyes, he saw Ken Zert leveling down on him for a finishing shot. Guns dropped from Lobo Jason's nerveless hands.

Then a six-shooter belched death behind Jason. Zert pitched forward, dying. Lobo caught a glimpse of Red Grimes, smoke curling from a gun in his fist. A hard, strong young arm kept Jason from falling from the saddle.

The lawman grinned. "Red, the Governor knows I'm a mean, law-hardened old man," he said. "When I recommend a pardon for an outlaw, there won't be any maybe about it. The Governor will grant one. You've won yore gunsmoke pardon, Red Grimes."

The smile that brightened Red Grimes's face told that he understood.

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT

(Continued from Page 72)

have to take them up at another sitting. You've got to remember that Nebraska was more or less the crossroads of the West, and a lot of history and tradition was built up within its borders."

"I'm sure of that," agreed the greenhorn. Then before he could go any further, the sound of the cook's triangle banged out over the C Bar S ranch, and the old-timer climbed to his feet to begin the jaunt to the evening meal. But the younker didn't mind that. He looked forward with interest to the continuation of the discussion of place names in Nebraska. We hope you will too!

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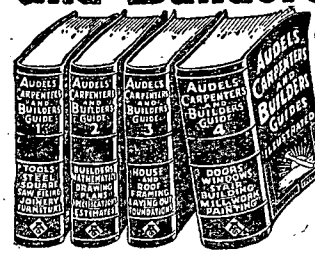

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from Page 7)

will kill the animal quickly. Or use a special muskrat trap (Blake and Lamb put out a good one) that either kills the rat, or prevents it from twisting without turning the entire trap at the same time.

Drowning sets can be made wherever the water is deep enough. A trick of experienced "rat" trappers is to add a piece of baling wire to the trap chain. Then stick a stake up out in deep water where the trap is set so that when the muskrat goes around it, he can't reach shallow water again.

Sometimes in making drowning sets the trap can be fastened to a light piece of brush, and the brush wired fast to some nearby object. When a rat caught in such a set reaches deep water he drowns. Yet when the trapper visits his line he can pull his catch back to shallow water by means of the attached wire.

Another good pelt-getting set can be made at the entrance to a muskrat den. Stake the trap solidly just inside the den entrance, either at the water's edge or several feet below water. Most muskrat dens have two entrances, a high one, and a low one deeper down. If you make your set at the deep water entrance a length of wire again comes in handy. Fasten one end to the trap. Attach the other end of the wire to some object above water, and a sprung trap can be withdrawn easily, and with the least disturbance to the den.

Traps set at the base of any fairly large tree, or old stump at a swamp edge, particularly if there are holes that extend under the roots, make shrewd muskrat sets. The animals are apt to investigate the big trees and stumps in search of food. Similarly the overhanging banks of shallow ponds are likely sites for a "rat" set. Dig a hole in the bank and set the trap there.

The Floating Log

Old rotted logs with one end in the water, the other out of it are favorable muskrat trap locations. The muskrats have a habit of climbing above water on such logs, or inside of them if the log is hollow, in their everlasting forays in search of food.

An old standby among muskrat trappers is the floating, or half floating log set. Roll

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a log into the water, if none happens to be handy and already in position. Place the trap about level with the log, pack marsh vegetation around it for camouflage, bait the log about 6 inches from where the trap is set and you are all ready for Mister Muskrat. If the log is actually floating in the water and may drift away make it fast to a stake, or some solid object on the bank like a tree stump.

Garden root vegetables, or bits of apple are food baits muskrats take a shine to. Lure baits, such as can be purchased from regular dealers in trappers supplies, are also good for attracting muskrats to a trap set.

Oregon, a good all around trapping State in the Pacific Northwest, produces an annual muskrat catch far up in the thousands. The "rats" are found in ponds and marshes in the mountain ranges and in surprising quantities along the vast irrigation ditches embraced in the various irrigation projects in the State. Klamath County, for instance, where native tule reeds line the main ditch banks.

In fact muskrats are such prolific reproducers that at times they become an injurious nuisance along the ditch-lined country, and now and then a local bounty is placed on trapping them—a bonus in addition to what the trapper receives for the skins.

Washington too is a State where well over 50,000 muskrat pelts are trapped yearly. However non-resident trapping licenses are not issued in Washington. You must live in the State a year to obtain a regular resident's license.

Plentiful in California

Muskrats are fairly plentiful in California where natural conditions for trapping the animals exist. But the annual take does not run as high there as in either Washington or Oregon. Idaho, on the other hand, where much of the country is extremely sparsely populated mountain wilderness tops all three of the previously mentioned western States in its yearly output of muskrat pelts. Better than 200,000 muskrat skins a year were reported as being taken in Idaho just before the war.

Even in the Southwest some 10,000 to 11,000 muskrats are trapped each year in specialized localities in New Mexico. The muskrats are found there in mountain

[*Turn page*]

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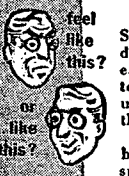

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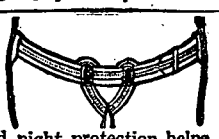

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ponds and shallow streams, tule swamps and along the irrigation ditches in the irrigated farming sections of the State.

The biggest muskrat trapping state of all is the swamp country in Louisiana. But muskrat trapping there is literally big business and a highly organized industry. Each year the muskrat take in Louisiana average over *two million* skins.

Back East, Maine is about as good as Oregon for muskrat trapping. New York tops Oregon and Washington combined. And Michigan is away up with a catch of between three quarters of a million and a million muskrat pelts per trapping season.

As a matter of fact most any state has some muskrat trapping. For part time trapping or for beginners who may intend later to go in for "rat" catches on a bigger scale it is a good idea to start out close to home, or somewhere within your own State first. Then after you have some practical experience under your belt you can spread out West—or wherever else you choose to go. Even Alaska, where, in addition to the more valuable individual skins trapped, nearly half a million muskrat hides are sent to market yearly.

See you all again, next issue. And thanks a lot for listenin'.

—*CAPTAIN RANGER.*

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

ARE TOMBSTONE JONES and SPEEDY SMITH as dumb as they act and talk, and just plain miraculously lucky, or are they really a pair of super-smart range detectives who act stupid to fool people and make their work easier? You'll find in the correspondence column that follows this fiction prediction a letter by a reader name of Ole Oleson who asks that question—and we've been floggin' our noggin for an answer ever since.

Up to then we never gave it any thought—just took for granted that pair of range-hoppers was bright as a polished law-badge in the Arizona sun. But now, after lookin' over the newest TOMBSTONE and SPEEDY novel, we're puzzleder'n a cow in a catclaw clump. Reckon maybe them two cow-cops is too wise even to let us know the status of their intellects—if any.

As to offering a prize, how are we going to offer cash money for the low-down on

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something we wouldn't know if it was the right answer or not, even if somebody sent it in? Possibly these two wandering waddies plus reader Oleson's brain-busting question has got us all tangled up in our own lass rope. If any of you other Tuttlefans has any dope or ideas on the subject, write in, for we certainly would like to get the business straightened out, and sure as a bull can beller we'll publish every printable letter comes in on the subject.

In the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN Tombstone and Speedy will be found cluttering up a fast-moving complete action novelet called HIDDEN LOOT ON THE BORDER. They just escape being fired in time to take over a job to lay the "Ghost of Paradise Valley." The same ghost, on top of having permanently killed one feller, has practically scared to death a half dozen others.

And Sheriff Hobie Sears and his deputy, Homer Alexander Rigby, who answer for what passes for law in Paradise, are as plumb mystified as the rest of us about the two wandering waddies. Homer, at first had his mind all made up on the subject, when

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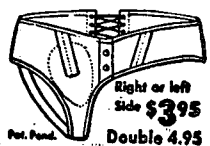

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he said to Sheriff Hobie, "You go and talk to that pair of road runners, and you'll think I ought to be teaching school in a college."

Later on Homer wasn't so sure. Howsomever, smart or dumb, TOMBSTONE and SPEEDY develop so much excitement in this novelet that Tombstone remarks, "Another couple hours of this kinda stuff and we'll both be old enough to retire."

And we're just about ready to bet our Sunday saddle that no one who starts this yarn is agointa retire till he comes to the plumb onexpected conclusion! All spoofing aside, it's a great reading treat!

You'll enjoy HIDDEN LOOT ON THE BORDER plenty! And—

Thousands of readers will be glad to know that the famous Arizona Ranger, Navajo Tom Raine, will be back next issue with his quick-triggered six-guns dealing Border justice in a tense tale of the Southwest by Jackson Cole—RANGERS LAUGH LAST. In this one Raine finds a way to double-cross a double-crosser that will keep you guessing worse'n a frog in a gooseberry thicket.

THE HARD TRAIL, next number's novelet, by Rolland Lynch, is an unusual and heart-warming story. It follows the comeback trail of a lad who wouldn't be licked—and couldn't be licked, even when death stacked and dealt the cards. This one is a yarn that's different! Write in and let us know what you think about it!

And those are just a sampling of the first-class fiction fare that'll be served to all who stop at our chuckwagon. So step up to the nearest newswagon before the beanpot's empty, and fill your plates to the brim. You're plumb welcome and we hope you stay a long time!

Letters to The Editor

AND here's the letter that caused all the foofaraw. We print it without further comment.

I am from Minnesota, once the land of the tall sticks and the former stamping grounds of Paul Bunyan and his gureat, bulue ox! And I am convinced that your W. C. Tuttle must be kinfolks to whoever it was that wrote down all them long, tall ones about old Paul, for surely he never thought up any worse windys than what old Tut pulls about them two galloping gallants, TOMBSTONE JONES and SPEEDY SMITH or TOMBSTONE SMITH AND SPEEDY JONES—I never can remember which is which.

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Now I am wondering if you would print a letter that is more full of puzzlement than praise—for I swear and be danged if them two galoots ain't about to send me down the road a-talking to myself. What I would like to know—are Speedy an' Tombstone just plain dumb and lucky, or are they right smart undercover hombres playin' lack-brain just to fool their cow-country customers as an aid to their rustler-rootin'?

I can't make out—and anyone who can is a better puzzle-buster than me. So Mr. Editor, here is what I am suggesting. Why don't you offer a good substantial grub-money prize for whatever reader comes up with the best solution to this world-shaking problem. I myself would guarantee to contribute a full bushel of gratitude to the kitty.

I hope you don't take this as a gripe against old Tut. In fact, for a feller that has been tops in Western fiction for only thirty years, I think he's doing all right.

Yours till the devil goes to work on ice skates and cowhands go to work afoot.

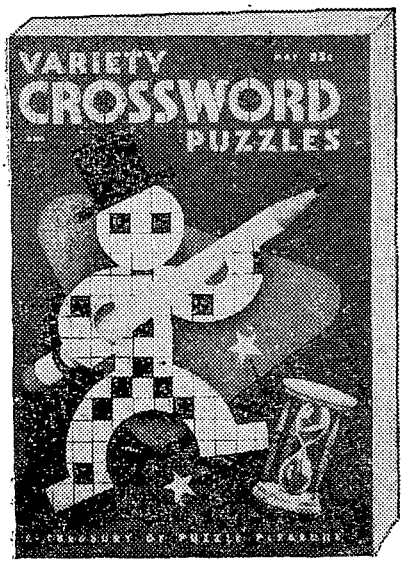
—*Ole Oleson, Moose Mountain, Minnesota*

My favorite character is Navajo Tom Raine. Though I like almost all the stories in EXCITING WESTERN, the ones that really thrill me are the ones about Navajo Tom. There is something about the cold and fearless way he goes about his job that sends shivers of admiration running up and down my backbone.

When this tall man, with the long, black hair and the guns with the turquoise butt plates, rides his splendid blue roan horse, Wampum, into the lonesome reaches of the desert in search of some salty badmen, I know that I am in for a journey into a far land of adventure that will take me completely out of myself.

[*Turn page*]

JUST OUT!



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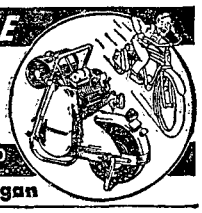

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—*Mona M. Lillibridge, Salt Springs, Arkansas*

We are very glad indeed to be able to bring something worth while to any reader, as we seem to have to Miss Lillibridge. But just to show how readers vary in their tastes, and how tough it is for an editor to know just what to print, we offer you the following:

How long have we got to put up with Tom Raine? To me he's as wooden as a cigar store Indian. He never cracks a smile; and the things he goes through are simply incredible. I find this deadly serious, deadpan type of horse opera a complete bore.

I hope you will forgive me for expressing my opinion frankly; I am crazy about W. C. Tuttle's TOMBSTONE AND SPEEDY yarns, and I find THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT articles by Chuck Stanley very interesting. But please spare us any more of those deadly dull Tom Raine stories.

—*Edward Sayres, Duluth, Minn.*

Well readers and readeresses, "You pays your money and you takes your choice." We can please most of the people most of the time, but we can't please all of the people all of the time. Remember that the more often you write us the better we'll be able to please you, and the majority vote wins! We're trying to give you the best magazine we know how—and so far reader response indicates we're succeeding in pleasing a good many folks, which makes us right happy.

EXCITING WESTERN is my idea of a magazine for perfect relaxation and real enjoyment. Thanks for some swell reading.

—*Andrew Androna, Springfield, Mass.*

That came on a postcard—and we're sure thankful for it. A postcard is as welcome as a sealed letter, you know, folks.

What I like about EXCITING WESTERN is its variety. There are stories to suit every taste, all the way from the funny adventures of Tombstone and Speedy to the daring exploits of Tom Raine and the real struggles of many other characters in many stories by fine writers. Reading EXCITING WESTERN is a vivid experience.

—*John Thornstone, Detroit, Mich.*

Thank you, John, and thanks to everybody else who wrote. Kindly address all your letters to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. So long, and happy reading.

—THE EDITOR.

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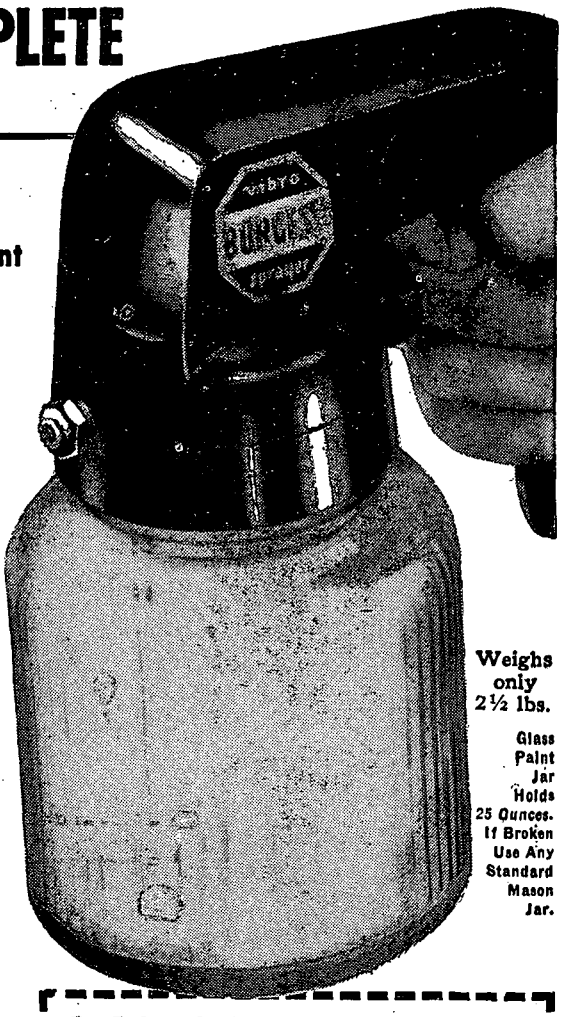
FREE 10 DAYS TRIAL IN YOUR OWN HOME

Paint - Floors, Wall, Ceilings, Furniture, Autos, Screens, Spray Moths, Insects, Plants, Flowers — *Easily and Perfectly!*



Weighs only 2½ lbs.

Glass Paint Jar Holds 25 Ounces. If Broken Use Any Standard Mason Jar.

Yes, now you can do a *professional painting* job on everything in and around your house with this amazing, brand new, self-contained electric paint sprayer. Just fill the big, 25-ounce capacity, interchangeable mason jar with any kind of ordinary oil-base liquid—lacquer, glossy paint, enamel, varnish, shellac, residual type insecticides, light oils, moth sprays, disinfectants, etc. Then plug the 8-ft. insulated cord into any 110-volt A.C. household outlet—pull the trigger—and get satin-smooth, professional results *every time!*

SAVE MONEY, TIME AND WORK

VIBRO-SPRAYER paints twice as fast as a brush, saves strain, fatigue, backache and sore muscles. Paint goes on FASTER, SMOOTHER and far more EASILY than with a brush. Adjustable spray control allows wide or narrow spray, thick or fine, as the job requires. Spray radius is always under complete control. VIBRO-SPRAYER cannot clog or drip—and is amazingly simple to clean. What's more, VIBRO-SPRAYER is *SAFE! Will never break in* use as there is NO pressure in the jar.

COSTS LESS THAN A GOOD BRUSH

Not only does VIBRO-SPRAYER paint faster, smoother, more easily than a good brush, but it actually costs less! And because VIBRO-SPRAYER applies paint more evenly and uniformly, you use LESS PAINT—save the cost of the sprayer in just a few months! In addition, VIBRO-SPRAYER shoots a fine, even spray into deep crevices where ordinary paint brushes can't reach, makes short work of rough or pebbled surfaces that are so difficult to brush.

MADE BY A FAMOUS COMPANY

VIBRO-SPRAYER is manufactured by the world-famous Burgess Battery Company, makers of popular auto and flashlight batteries. Every VIBRO-SPRAYER is guaranteed by the manufacturer to be free of mechanical defects. In addition, we guarantee that VIBRO-SPRAYER will give you exactly the professional, fast, labor and money saving results you desire, or you may return your sprayer within 10 days for full purchase price refund. You get FULL PROTECTION under this DOUBLE GUARANTEE!

SEND NO MONEY

Send only the coupon, now. When your VIBRO-SPRAYER arrives, pay the postman only $12.95 plus small delivery charge—or enclose full payment now and we pay all delivery charges. In either case you are fully protected by the manufacturer's guarantee of mechanical perfection, and our guarantee of complete satisfaction, or return your VIBRO-SPRAYER within 10 days for full purchase price refund. Send the coupon AT ONCE!

FOSTER PRODUCTS, INC.
179 Wooster St., New York 12, N. Y.

FREE TRIAL COUPON — MAIL NOW!

FOSTER PRODUCTS, INC., Dept. SG-120
179 Wooster St., New York 12, N. Y.

Please send a VIBRO-SPRAYER for 10 days no-risk examination. On arrival I will pay the postman only $12.95 plus small delivery and handling charge.

☐ Check here if you enclose $12.95 now. We pay all delivery and handling charges.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... Zone..... State.....

NOTE: Whether you order C.O.D., or prepaid, you receive the full protection of our GUARANTEE of satisfaction or money back!

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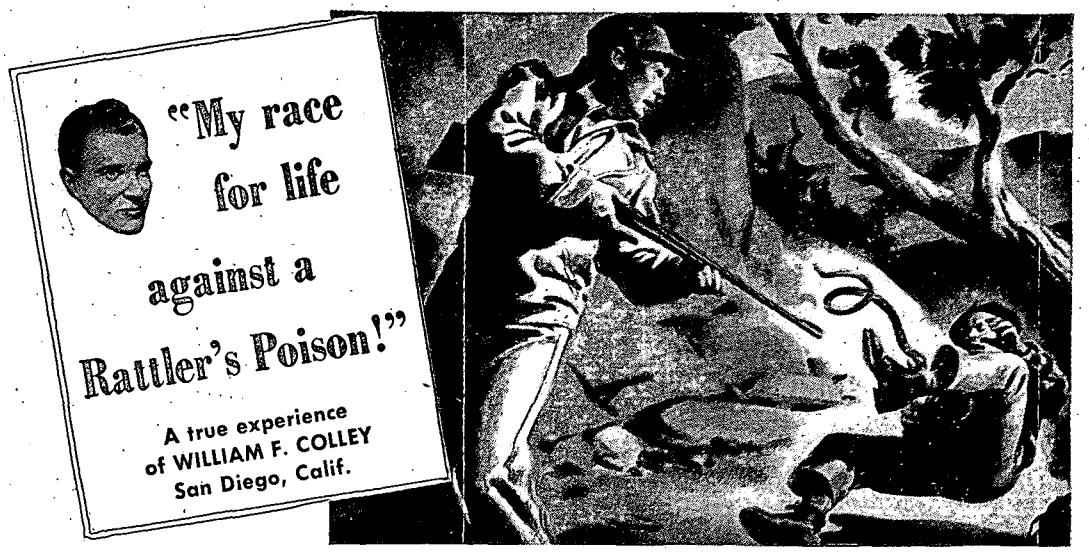
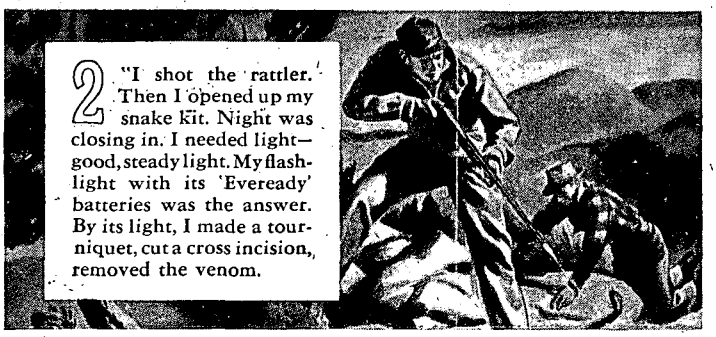


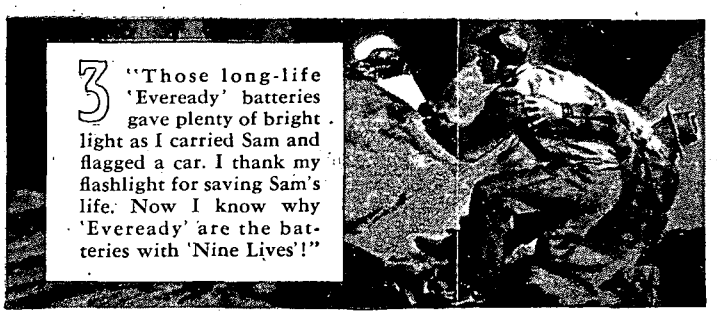
"My race for life against a Rattler's Poison!"

A true experience of WILLIAM F. COLLEY San Diego, Calif.

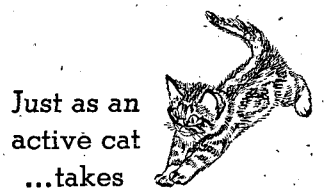
1 "A piercing shriek cut the silence as I lay in wait for deer in the Laguna Mountains near San Diego. I dashed to Sam Reardon, my hunting companion. A 3½-foot rattler had dug his fangs into Sam's ankle! Twice in my own life, I'd felt the rattler's sting. I knew what to do.



2 "I shot the rattler. Then I opened up my snake kit. Night was closing in. I needed light—good, steady light. My flashlight with its 'Eveready' batteries was the answer. By its light, I made a tourniquet, cut a cross incision, removed the venom.



3 "Those long-life 'Eveready' batteries gave plenty of bright light as I carried Sam and flagged a car. I thank my flashlight for saving Sam's life. Now I know why 'Eveready' are the batteries with 'Nine Lives'!"



Just as an active cat ...takes a cat nap ... and *bounces back* with new pep ... so "Eveready" flashlight batteries recover power between uses and *bounce back* for *extra life!*

THE FLASHLIGHT BATTERY WITH "NINE LIVES"!

"Eveready," "Nine Lives," and the cat symbol are trade-marks of

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.

30 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation

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